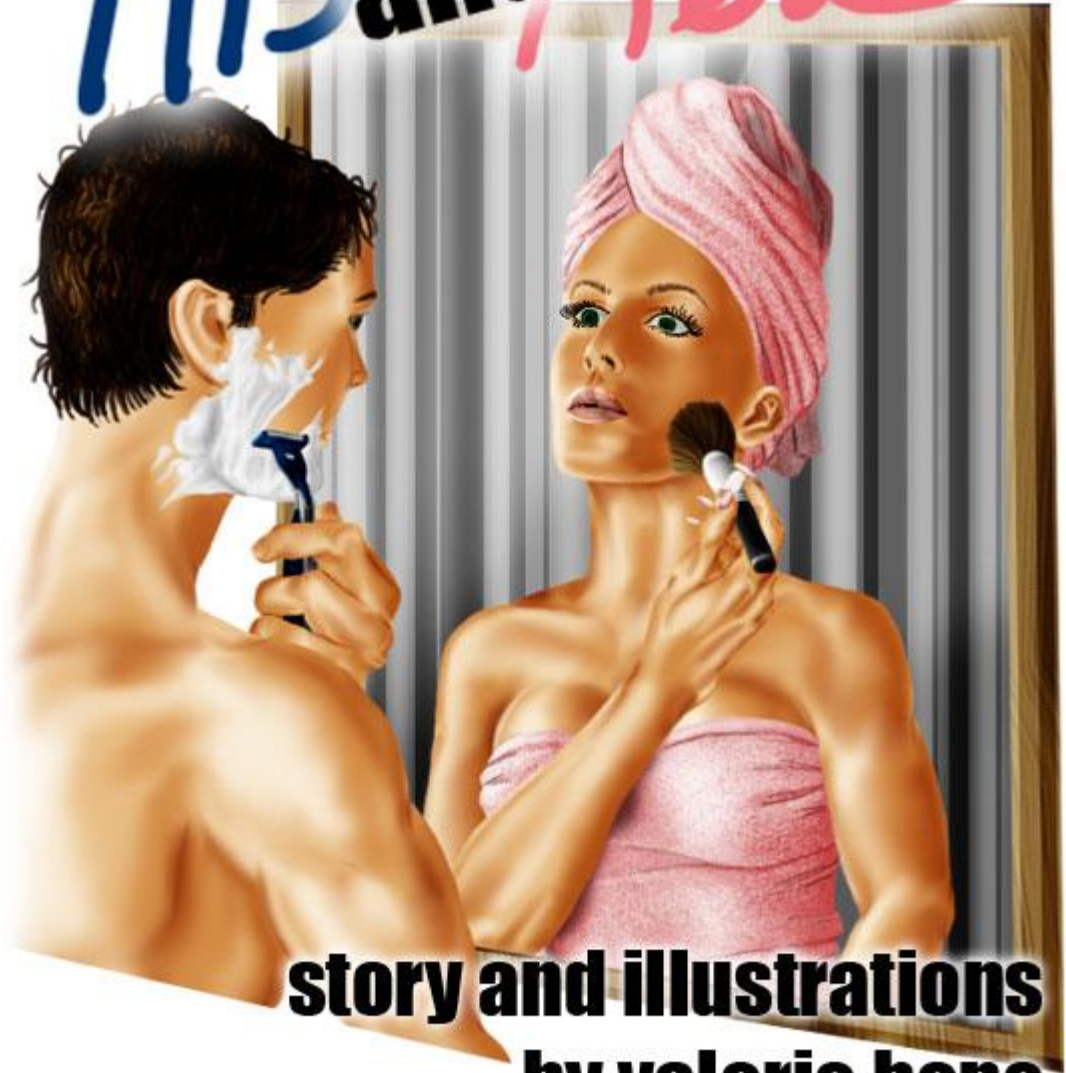


**SUMMARY:** Agreeing to house-sit for a buddy of his, one guy soon discovers that the house is more than it seems when the spirit of a young woman, who died there years ago, invades his body and starts to control his thoughts and desires while also discovering how a modern woman lives.

# His and Hers<sup>♥</sup>



**story and illustrations  
by valerie hope**

**Part One**

A DAY NEVER PASSED WHERE I didn't miss college. Ever since graduation, a few months prior, I'd been working my way through my welcome on the couches of various friends, trying desperately to parlay my Bachelor's in Psychology into something approximating a paying job. The cut-off for the grace period for my student loans loomed ever closer, and my prospects dwindled away to nothing.

I was living in my car, finally evicted from the garage of one of my old frat brothers, when I got the call on my cheap cell-phone from Stuart Campbell, the president of my frat and one of the financially better-off people I knew. He came from old money – his dad was in the oil business – and I'd tried to figure out how to hit him up for a job, but he and I had never been close enough friends to really merit such a discussion. I was surprised beyond words to hear his voice on the other end of the phone.

“Hey, Stu, what's going on?” I stammered once the shock wore off.

“Too much, man,” he answered truthfully. “I was calling to ask you a favor.”

“You know I will if I can,” I told him.

“My unit deploys overseas in two weeks. I'm going to be in Afghanistan for six months,” he told me.

“Shit,” I commented. “Keep your head down.”

He chuckled. “I will. I doubt I'm going to see any action, really, I'm just there to help build a natural gas plant and string some power lines,” he told me. “But anyway, the reason I called... I heard from Kurt Lang that you're out of work right now.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Not for lack of trying.”

“I understand. Times are tough. If Dad wasn't so hot on me running for the Senate one day, I wouldn't be in the military right now. I could maybe offer you something at the company. But I can't make that call right now. Maybe when I get back.”

“That would be great,” I told him a little flatly, thinking *Six months? I'll have to move back in with my fucking parents by then.*

“But hey – I need somebody to house-sit for me while I'm gone. Y'know – water the plants and feed the fish, that kind of shit. I figured as long as you were looking for work, maybe you could help me out? It's a free place to stay and I'll pay for food and cable and shit like that. Hunting jobs is a lot easier with someplace to call home base, y'know?”

I goggled. “Wow,” I said. “I mean... yeah! That would be fantastic, dude. That would really help me out a lot.”

“It helps me too, bro,” he told me honestly. “So, whaddaya say?”

“I say give me the address,” I told him. “I can be there whenever you want. My calendar isn't exactly full right now.”

“It's 13423 Windy Mountain Drive,” he said. “Come on over whenever you feel like it. I'll give you the nickel tour.”

\* \* \*

I figured Stu would have lived in someplace nice, but I never expected the mansion built into the side of a limestone cliff that awaited me when I drove through the gate and past the manicured lawn into his house. Stu waited for me outside, waving, when I brought my rickety Ford Fiesta to a sputtering stop in his cobblestone driveway.

I gave him a quick “bro-hug” and exchanged the “how's-it-going-you-look-good” style pleasantries with my ex-president. I couldn't keep my attention off of the sprawling place behind him, and he finally turned around and let me have my first real unobstructed view.

“Wow,” I breathed.

“I know, right?” Stu laughed. “My dad just fucking gave it to me. He never liked the place, y'know, for a house to live in, but the property was too good an investment.”

It was a three-story house with white wooden exterior and turret windows, a railed porch running the entire circumference, looking old and antique-ish while at the same time slick and modern. Bumblebees hummed softly in the neatly-trimmed hydrangea bushes along the front porch.

“He didn't like living here? How come?” I asked.

“Stupid, actually,” Stu scoffed. “He said he thought it was haunted. He never really went into detail, but he said strange shit happened when he stayed here. You believe in that shit?”

I shrugged. “Never thought about it much,” I said. “I figure if it's a free place to stay for a while, then shit – I don't care if it's haunted or not. Doesn't matter to me a damned bit.”

“That's the spirit,” Stu said. “Come on in. I'll show you around.”



I walked into the foyer, across polished hardwood floors, trying not to bump against the expensive designer furniture with my ratty backpack slung over my shoulders. Stu took me into the living room, overlooking a large backyard patio with a swimming pool, and gestured around grandly.

“Kitchen's in there, over there is the master bedroom with the bath, the garage is through there – feel free to use my car if you like, it's not gonna do me any good just sitting there for six months,” he said distractedly, pointing out the finer features. He led me upstairs the same way, indicating the bedrooms and bathrooms, the library and game room, all the amenities and perks of the house. My sense of absolute wonder grew with every step, every stolen glance into each nook and cranny.

“This place is amazing,” I finally said when the tour ended.

“Yeah, I like it. Kind of this cool fusion between old and new. It used to be a fucking brothel, did you know that? Back in the 1900s and 1910s. A genuine bonafide whorehouse.”

“Sweet!” I said. “You should totally throw a warehouse party in here.”

Stu laughed. “That would be pretty cool,” he said. “But I don't want the place to get trashed. I mean, this is my home. I don't want to live anyplace else. I plan on getting married, having kids, the whole package – all right here in this house. Don't want to start out by wrecking the place, y'know?”

“I get it,” I told him. “No parties.”

“Do whatever you want,” Stu laughed. “That wasn't a hint. Just keep the place clean, bring in the mail, that kind of stuff. I have a gardener who comes in once a week to take care of the outside, so you don't have to worry about mowing or anything like that, and the pool guy takes care of the water. All you have to do is scoop out the leaves every now and then.”

“Stu, man, thanks a lot. Seriously. Thanks for thinking of me.”

“What are brothers for?” he said sheepishly. “I figure if it helps out both of us, then where's the downside? Besides, you were always cool when we were in Alpha Chi. Quiet, responsible, under control – the exact kind of person I would want staying in my house while I was gone.”

“I appreciate it,” I told him, a bit touched.

“So, I'm heading to New York in three days to visit my mom before I report to base,” he told me. “Could you be ready to move in by then?”

“I'm ready to move in *now*, bro. I've been living in my car for two weeks,” I confessed.

“Then just pick yourself out a room and drop your shit,” he told me. “I got more than enough room. I didn't know you were that far gone or I would've called you weeks ago.”

“No big,” I said, trying not to wobble on my feet from the weight that got lifted off of me in that moment. “I'll pick out something upstairs, y'know, kinda stay out of your way. I'm out most days looking for a job anyway. I won't be any trouble.”

“I know you won't,” Stu answered. “And hey – while you're here, do me a favor. If you *do* actually see any cool ghost shit happen, write it down or try to get a picture or something. I think that shit is kinda bad assed. I'd love to have some cool stories or a picture or something.”

“No problem,” I told him. “I'll keep my eye out. Did anything happen here? Is that why people say it's haunted?”

Stu shrugged. “I looked into it a little right after Dad bought this place,” he said. “It turns out one of the whores here – I think her name was Sarah something – fell in love with one of her johns. He knocked her up, I think, and then said he was gonna marry her. But something happened to him, nobody's really sure exactly what, and the night he was supposed to pick her up and elope with her, he never showed up. Sarah kinda lost her shit and apparently hung herself in one of the rooms.”

“Cool,” I said. “Any idea which room?”

He pointed up the stairs. “Third door on the left,” Stu said. “That's where Dad said he always heard shit thumping around. I've been in there a hundred times, I've never seen a damn thing. Maybe you'll have better luck than I did.”

“Maybe so,” I said.

Stu clapped me on the shoulder. “You go get settled in, bro. I have to go into town for a while and see some people. Set up a bank account that you can use to pay bills and buy groceries, that kind of thing. Help yourself to the refrigerator, the television, whatever. Consider this your place, bro.”

\* \* \*

Stu was true to his word, at least – he did basically give me the run of the place after that. I puttered around, acquainting myself with the layout of the huge house, and wound up taking a very satisfying nap on the couch in the TV room. Stu must've come in while I was asleep, because an envelope with about \$300 in cash and a ring of fresh-cut keys lay on the table next to me that had not been there when I nodded off.

The next three days stayed largely the same – I saw Stu once or twice around the house, in the small but very well equipped home gym above the garage in the mornings, or in the kitchen at night, occasionally in the TV room as he watched the news. I stepped into the role of cook and maid easily enough – feeling like I needed to earn my keep, at any rate – and made enough food for two and tried to keep the place swept up and vacuumed, the trash taken out and the dishes washed. Stu usually left for his errands around eight o'clock in the morning and I was out the door right behind him, out pounding the pavement looking for a job.

Stu left for New York on the morning of the fourth day I was at the house, without fanfare. He only left me a note saying “thanks” and giving me the number of a friend of his dad's who might be hiring.

The enormity of having the run of the house sunk in slowly over the next day. I found myself just wandering aimlessly around the old restored bordello, poking my head in from room to room, exploring all the little nooks and crannies on the first floor, then the second. It was three days of frustrating “don't-call-us-we'll-call-you” interactions with local companies before I finally clomped heavily up the staircase all the way to the top of the house.

The rooms on the third floor appeared more ageless than the others, like a fine film of dust which lay over everything, giving a sense of time passing that the newer, more polished parts of the lower floors didn't convey. The stairs were worn a little, the carpets a little frayed at the edges, the hardwood a little creakier. Much easier, on the third floor, to believe in the myths of ghosts and suicide.

I poked my head into a small bedroom in one of the house's four turrets and saw that it was stacked floor to ceiling with trunks and boxes. Delighted, I broke into the first of the dusty boxes and found a cache of old, cut-glass doorknobs – the remnants of the old fixtures from when the house was renovated. Another box held musty, antique lace drapes and one steamer trunk with a rusty clasp overflowed with old, turn-of-the-century clothes and costume jewelry. I found a woman's beaded purse slung over the headboard of an antique bed in the corner, holding a silver filigreed hip flask and a matching cigarette case which might have fetched a little money at auction. A small table nearby held an old black-and-white portrait of a young, sad-eyed woman and a cut-glass perfume atomizer with a fringed bulb. A small drawer in the table held a leather copy of the collected poems of Emily Dickinson and a small embossed diary held with a brass clasp.

Unable to restrain my curiosity, I jimmied open the small clasp and flipped to the first page. Covered with flowing cursive script, the first passage seemed to almost read itself, so anxious the story seemed to have itself told:

September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1909

*Dear Diary,*

*The last of my money finally ran out. I've been from one end of this town to the other, honestly, trying to find some kind of employment. My rent at the women's home is paid until the end of the week and once that is used up, I'm not sure what I'm going to do. The only hope I have is one of the gentlemen I met at the Methodist church told me there was work to be had at the large house outside of town, up the mountain a little way. Imagine*

*my dread when I discovered it to be a house of ill repute! To be told such a thing, at a church, no less – how ghastly!*

*I don't know what I am going to do, dear Diary. My prospects become smaller and smaller with each passing minute. I confess, I have even considered walking to the house on the mountain and asking about work. Perhaps they need a washerwoman or a maid. That would serve, would it not? I would not be selling my body like a Jezebel but still find some kind of gainful use for myself, perhaps a hot meal and money to pay my fees at the hotel? I do not see many other opportunities arising. The school has no need of teachers and the nearby sanatorium does not want for nurses. The man who advertised in the newspaper for a clerk for his shipping business stands a little too close for my tastes and I do not appreciate his suggestive leering at me. His breath stinks of liquor and garlic and I do not wish to spend time in the man's company.*

*I will pray to the good Lord and see if He has any guidance to spare me. I do not regret leaving my home, and the monster of a man who married my poor fragile mother. If employment at a brothel is all that Providence can offer me, then I will make do. Anything is better than returning home to that beast.*

I couldn't believe what I held. I ran fingers across the dry, crinkled pages in wonder. This might be the girl who spawned all the ghost stories! I repacked the boxes I had dislodged in my exploration and tucked the diary under my arm, trotting down the stairs in excitement. Stu was going to love this! I pulled a cold imported beer from the fridge once downstairs and sipped it on my way down to the sofa in the living room, my night now suddenly dedicated to reading every word of the dusty old journal. Flopping down on the expensive couch, I propped my feet up on the arm and tucked a throw pillow (worth more than my car, I suspected) under my head, opening the diary again and turning over the delicate, fragile pages to the next entry:

October 4<sup>th</sup>, 1908

*Dear Diary,*

*It astounds me how much laundry these women generate in a day! How can women who do no outdoor work manage to get their clothing so filthy? Some of them change their clothes five and six times daily, and none of it is simple to wash – it is all delicate fabrics and finery which need to be scrubbed ever so gently by hand.*

*Try as I might, though, it is very difficult not to have my breath stolen away by the beauty of these women and their elegant dresses and shoes. Every night they laugh and dance and charm the gentlemen, their gay conversations drifting through the door of my little room at the foot of the stairs. I wonder sometimes what it would feel like to dress myself all in silk and satin, with pearls and diamonds around my neck, and spend my evenings sipping champagne and exchanging witty conversation with the gentlemen of the town in the parlor or on the porch outside. And, God forgive me, I do so wonder what actually happens when one of the women here lead one gentlemen by his hand upstairs into her room and closes the door behind her. I am not unfamiliar with what happens between a man and a woman in the marriage bed – I am a woman grown, sixteen years old, after all – but these women make such an art of everything, I cannot imagine that their behavior in the boudoir would be any less graceful.*

*I should not think such thoughts. These are fallen women and should be saved from their lives of iniquity. But surely God would understand my curiosity? They cannot be completely corrupted, can they? Several of these women have been extremely kind to me. One of them, a woman named Doris, gave me a flower she picked from the garden and told me how pretty I was. No one had ever called me pretty before. If Jesus could forgive Magdalene her sins and see goodness in her, am I not bound to try the same?*

I flipped the page, voracious for more. The sun sank low outside, giving the house an eerie appearance as bright moonlight shone through the large windows.

November 12<sup>th</sup>, 1908

*Dear Diary,*

*Doris and Mathilda both surprised me today. How they found out it was my birthday I will never know. The recent rains have driven business away and many of the women have been idle for days. Some have become quite short tempered and spats have broken out between them. I think everyone needed a reason to celebrate. They baked me a cake and hosted a party in my honor with music and dancing and balloons. They even gifted me a little silver locket engraved with my initial. How very sweet and sisterly these women are! I confess freely, Diary, how wrong I was in my original opinion. I do not approve of how they earn their living but I could never harshly judge such true and loyal friends. No one has ever made me a party before.*

*We stayed up late into the night, listening to the gramophone. The women taught me how to dance – how clumsy I was the first time I tried the steps! They embraced me and wished me happy returns of the day. Maureen used her hot iron to put curls in my hair – she assured me they would wash out at my next bath – and begged me to let her bleach my hair. I demurred, of course, but only after every single woman in the house professed how beautiful I would look sporting blonde tresses. Esther showed me how to put on her lipstick and she painted my face like her own. How elegant I looked! Lord forgive me, I even tried my first glass of champagne and my very first cigarette. I am ashamed to say, I now know why the women here adore them so. I find myself thinking of sneaking small sips and puffs during my chores. I do not think the women here would mind, not if I asked. They seem to genuinely like me. It is wonderful to have such friends. If any of the new experiences they have expressed a willingness to show me are as exciting and lovely as the ones I lived last night, I can easily imagine a lifetime of delight and wonder!*

The only sound I heard was that of the crickets and tree-frogs singing in the trees outside. The house nestled into its hillside far from the city below and its overpowering lights, leaving a deep velvety blackness outside the windows. I clicked a little lamp to life on an end table with a little twinge of regret, but needing to push back the blackness to keep reading.

*December 18<sup>th</sup>, 1908*

*Dear Diary,*

*Is it wrong of me to wish for some extra money so that I could afford presents for my new friends? I do not wish to sound greedy, Diary, but my meager wages here do not allow for much beyond my own maintenance and upkeep. I only wish to express my admiration and fondness for my friends here. I do not wish for anything of my own.*

*It is because of this that I have searched my soul and yesterday went to Estelle, the madam of the household, and asked if I could entertain clients. Oh, Diary, my shame! My face burned with redness as I made the request, but I swear by Holy God my motives were pure. Perhaps only this once. Just so that I might be able to show my affection to my friends.*

*Estelle threw her arms around me like a long-lost sister when I asked her, laughing and clasping me to her bosom. She told me that many of the gentlemen who visited her establishment had commented upon me and that, should I be serious in my request, I should expect a brisk and lucrative business. She asked me if I had given my favor suitable thought, telling me it was not a decision to be taken lightly. I assured her that I had. Truthfully,*

*Diary, the thought of joining the ranks of the lovely women I so adore as one of them – truly one of them – excites and thrills me endlessly. Perhaps my motives are selfish. I do not know. I am only certain that I no longer wish to exist outside of this world. I must either join it wholeheartedly or leave it, never to return.*

*Estelle gave me over to Doris, the woman who befriended me early in my tenure here. Doris seemed so excited and gay at the prospect of transforming me into a woman of the night, it took my shame and trepidation away utterly. She plucked my eyebrows and washed my hair in peroxide the way she had always dreamed of doing. How strange I look to myself in the mirror with white-gold locks instead of the chestnut I have always seen! She taught me to shave the hair from my body and legs and spent a happy hour or two applying paints and powders on my face until I looked so glamorous I could scarcely recognize myself! She dressed me in a beaded silk gown which, I confess, did not cover enough of my legs and shoed me with a built-up heel which made me take little mincing steps. She pierced my ears – it did not hurt as much as I feared it would – and dangled golden baubles which tickled my neck when I moved. I felt like a queen in a castle, being fawned and preened over so!*

*Doris asked me if I was still a maiden, and I told her I was. She said nothing, only led me into the bathroom just to the left of the stairs and threw the bolt on the door. As I made to ask her what wonderment she would show me next, Doris pushed me bodily against the door and kissed me so thoroughly I felt my legs would collapse.*

*Bear in mind, Diary, that I have only received a few childish kisses from boys at church and school up until now. Nothing like Doris. She forced my lips apart with her own and snaked her tongue into my mouth. Her hands slithered across me, releasing my dress to shimmer down my body onto the floor. She kneaded my breasts in such a way that left me trembling and gasping! Never in all my life would I have imagined such pleasure! It so overwhelmed my senses that I never even stopped at the oddity of being kissed and touched so intimately by another woman. She smiled at me and caressed my cheek, then began kissing my neck. I could not stop the moans from my lips. Her hands explored my skin and wandered downwards, ever lower, towards that place between my legs which bore Original Sin. I tried, with all my might, to push her away and close my legs to her ministrations, but my hips thrust forward and my legs blossomed open to her seemingly against my very will. I tangled my fingers in her soft hair and kissed her more passionately than I believed myself capable, like one of the fiery temptresses in the bawdy books I'd read from the parlor at night. Her hands found my cunny and pressed inwards, inside me, and I found myself flooded with a slick and warm dampness I had never felt*

*before. There was a sharp pain inside me, like something torn, and I felt a little rush of blood, but it was completely lost in the swell of pure pleasure as Doris' fingers sank inside me, into my innermost depths. I melted against her, sagging down the wall, and we tangled together bodily on the floor amidst a pile of our silken finery...*

I realized with a start that I had been holding my breath, completely enraptured by the words on the faded page. A straining, insistent erection tented the front of my jeans, throbbing in time with my pulse, and I felt a palpable strain in my mind from needing both hands to hold the book open and desperately wishing for a third to help ease the demanding urge rising between my legs.

*Doris led me to the bathtub and kissed my cheeks and neck as she filled a bath. She scented it with lilac and lavender – a smell I shall never forget in all my days, now – and lowered me into the warm water. With my maidenhead broken now, her fingers slipped inside me readily and my moans turned into little girlish squeals. I surrendered control of myself entirely to her but could not suppress my shock when she perched me on the edge of the cool porcelain and lowered her lips onto my nethers. Diary, I could search for a hundred years and never describe the swelling crescendo of sensation that built in me as she lapped at my secret parts, culminating in an explosion of utter rapture which left me screaming and breathless at the same time, my fingers digging into her scalp as I pushed myself against her hungry lips, bucking back and forth like a wild thing...*

I could stand it no longer. I tucked the diary underneath one arm and raced up the stairs to the bathroom described in the journal. I knew exactly where it was from my exploration of the house, and felt a deep desire in my heart and mind to release my orgasm in the same room where she had her first. I barely had time enough to drop my pants to my ankles and grasp my erection in one hand before I exploded, sending hot jets of cum into the little porcelain pedestal basin. I gripped the edge of the basin tightly to keep myself from sinking painfully to my knees and panted until I regained my composure a little bit.

The bathroom was certainly girlish enough – decorated in shades of pastel pink with white trim. It even still smelled a little bit like lilac and lavender, I thought, but maybe that was simply me waxing poetic. I did feel a sense of her, though, in the room where she blossomed for the first time into sexual womanhood. I fancied that I might even hear her sighs and moans.

Looking down at the sticky mess I'd made, I opted to just shuck out of my clothes and leave them on a pile in the floor and crawl into the antique clawfoot tub, drawing the pink shower curtain closed and rinsing myself off

in the hot water. I lingered only long enough to draw another, less intense but far sweeter orgasm from myself with my hand, and then shut off the water and reached out for a towel to dry myself. The rod held two towels – a pale blue embroidered with the word “His” and a pale pink embroidered with the word “Hers.” Thinking only of the young beauty who began her journey into lascivious adulthood in this very room, I grabbed the one marked “Hers” and toweled the moisture from my face and body. Strangely, it seemed that little trails of sparkling light followed the sweep of the towel along my body and left my skin tingling faintly in its wake. I sighed in utter contentment.



Unsure what to do with the rest of my evening, I trotted back downstairs. The release of my orgasm and the subsequent disinterest in things sexual which followed brought mundane things like my hunger and my need to urinate into sharper focus. I tended to myself distractedly, opening another beer and piling lunch meat onto bread for my supper after relieving myself. A part of my brain longed to get back to reading the diary, but I knew that I would become obsessed quickly if I did not put that book down and return

to the business of my life. I watched SportsCenter and returned a few emails – more rejection from local employers – before yawning and stretching and making my way to bed.

I stood in my room, still feeling the faint tingling sensation along my body as I removed my clothes. Thoughts of the young girl turned prostitute tickled the back of my mind and I lost myself in imagining how she must have felt, suddenly at the mercy of this yawning, urgent want inside her and surrendering to the tutelage of a house full of whores to teach her how to satisfy this burgeoning sexual hunger. A swelling of desire rose in my chest, feeling almost like a bubble of gas, stretching almost to the point of pain. That sense of her presence flowed almost palpably around me, poking and prodding at my skin as if seeking a way in through the smallest pore. The 'bubble' in my chest seemed to respond in kind, opening wider and stretching me inside to the point of pain. I grabbed my chest, suddenly breathless, and opened my mouth in an attempt to groan my discomfort away. As soon as my lips parted I felt the presence swirling around me dart inside, filling my lungs and leaching itself into my flesh and blood.



I screamed, and the sound of it shocked my ears – changing from my customary baritone up the intervening octaves to a breathy, girlish soprano. My hands were thrust away from my well-muscled chest by two inflating mounds of soft, sensitive flesh and my fingers were separated by two large, erect nipples. Golden-white hair spilled over shoulders becoming narrower by the instant. The little bit of 'table muscle' around my midsection shrank away to a flat, muscled stomach and the hard lines of defined muscle on my arms softened visibly into sleek, lissome lines. I felt a swell of jiggling fat and muscle swell my bottom outwards into pillowy, teardrop-shaped softness and the barest breath of air stirring now registered grandly against skin twice as sensitive as before. Long, elfin eyelashes now ringed my field of vision as I saw my penis – never huge or majestic in the first place, but at least solid and ample and *mine* – wrinkle upwards into my body, disappearing beneath a slender delta of pubic hair atop a little mound of softness hiding everything beneath it. My fingernails extended outwards past the tips of my now-slender fingers, scratching deliciously against my new breasts.

I looked in the nearby mirror in shock. The reflection of a tall, long-legged blonde with bee-stung lips and huge green eyes stared back at me, a fresh-faced beauty who would not have been at all out of place in any *Playboy* centerfold, oozing that effortless sex appeal that drew men's eyes and thoughts. I touched my face in disbelief, surprised when the reflection did the same.

“What... what just happened?” my high, little-girl soprano voice mewled.

Something I could only describe as a fog seemed to temporarily pass in my vision. A sense of loss filled me, and also confusion – I wanted to know what had happened to my house, and all my things. I felt a pain through my chest which came and went in a flash and then as profound a sorrow as I had ever felt in my life.

As soon as the storm of emotion came, it fled, leaving only the numb shock of the transformation which could not possibly be a dream. I looked at my new face again, confusion and dismay evident on the beautiful features, and suddenly blurted out a thought which popped unbidden and alien into my head.

“God, I look a fright,” I breathed.

Self-consciousness descended on me like a hammer. The very thought of standing naked in my room, hair disheveled and face bare of makeup, scandalized me to my core and made me feel slovenly and cheap. I had no choice but to heed this wild urge, scampering back upstairs quickly (and

feeling my breasts jiggle on my chest with every step for the first time) to the bathroom with the his-and-hers towels. Without even needing to search or feeling the slightest hint of being lost, I opened a cabinet beside the basin and found it stocked with every manner of cosmetic I could imagine. My hands seemed to handle the brushes and applicators of their own accord. I painted my face nimbly and with consummate skill, watching numbly in the mirror as my body seemed to act on memories and skills I knew I had never learned, transforming myself from the wide-eyed natural beauty into a sultry, glamorous vixen. Words darted through my terrified brain – *eyeliner, mascara, foundation and concealer, moisturizer, BB cream* – as if I knew them intimately.

My hands seemed to slow a little bit once I dusted my face with sweet-smelling powder. I found myself walking – not entirely of my own free will but terrified to try and stop myself – to an adjoining room where I entered a small walk-in closet and pulled a satin robe over my smooth, hairless flesh. I rummaged for a moment in a drawer beside an empty bed-frame and came out with a dusty bottle of vodka and a package of cigarettes. Taking them along with me, I went back into yet another adjacent room and sat at a small vanity, opening a jewelry box atop the table and fitting myself with a few gold rings set with diamonds and some similar necklaces. I filed and then lacquered my long fingernails with a deep red polish and applied a thick glossy coat of matching lipstick. Finding a set of modern-era hot rollers in a drawer, I set my hair and perused a dated *Cosmopolitan* magazine while I slugged vodka straight from the bottle and lit a white cigarette with a book of matches found on a nearby candleholder. That seemed to frighten me even more than my hands working of their own accord – I had never in my life smoked, only a few drunken puffs from a friend's Marlboro at a frat party once which left me coughing to the point of nausea. Now not only did I draw the stale smoke deep into my lungs from the very first drag, releasing half a roomful of billowing grey smoke upwards from my glossy lips and never coughing once, I could feel tensions I never knew I carried being released as if I satisfied a long-held urge. I even thought to myself, *God, I've been absolutely dying for one of these!* completely unbidden, like a lifelong smoker who had been denied for too long and finally managed a few uninterrupted moments alone to step outside and slake her addiction.

I looked at the white cigarette releasing lazy curls of smoke from between my long-nailed fingers, its filter tip stained with glossy red lipstick just like the mouth of the bottle I held in my other hand. I was a beer drinker my nature and temperate at best – I never really cared for the loss of control which accompanied drunkenness, even in college where such behavior was encouraged. And that was when the full force of what had just happened to me hit, all at once: *I have someone else inside me.*

My eyes were drawn back to the article open in my magazine – hot makeup looks for spring, but out of style by at least a year – and noticed a part of my beleaguered mind voraciously gobbling up every little tidbit of advice on color and style. There was someone inside me. Someone who hadn't had a chance to drink or smoke or keep up on the latest fashions in quite some time.



This house was no longer haunted. The ghost inside it now possessed a physical body. Never mind that the body had been the incorrect gender. The ghost had seen to that.

“This is just a dream,” I tried to reassure myself. “I’m asleep, and this is just a vivid dream I’m having. I should know better than to eat so close to bedtime. I gave myself a nightmare.”

Nothing happened. So either the old adage about admitting you were in a dream was just a myth, or I was doing it wrong, or...

...or this wasn't a dream at all.

“My name is Steven Elliot McAllister,” I said aloud. “I’m twenty-three years old and I am a biological male. I was born male. I have a penis and I do *not* wear makeup or dresses.”

The words rang foreign and alien in my ears, as if I’d suddenly started speaking fluent Mandarin Chinese but with no earthly idea what I was saying. I cleared my throat and tried again, but the words twisted in my head into some strange position of comfort for me, easing the sense of wrongness surrounding my words as they warped in my mouth to say: “My name is Stephanie Elizabeth McAllister. I am twenty years old and a woman grown. I was born female, I have a little pink cunny between my legs and I *love* how I look with my face powdered and in a lovely gown.”

“Hmph,” I snorted after hearing the words. “I reckon no one talks like that any more. I think perhaps I should watch that television machine in the parlor and try to sound more like a modern girl. I’d hate for anyone to think I was behind the times.”

*Dear God, I thought frantically. I’m just a passenger in my own body. I have been completely taken over by this. This is not a dream. This is really happening. The ghost possessed me. Turned me into what she remembered being. She turned me into a little teenaged whore.*

I puffed another deep breath of smoke upwards towards the ceiling. I found that if I concentrated, I broke the spell a bit and could exercise a little bit of control of myself. I briefly considered calling 911 and begging for help, but who would believe my story? I could just see the paramedics now, trying to maintain a professional demeanor and not roll their eyes as I told them I started this evening as a six-foot-one, two hundred and ten pound male with a five o’clock shadow and a little bit of a beer belly and then read a diary from the turn of the last century and suddenly became a long-legged blonde of about five-foot-five and not possibly weighing in at more than a hundred fifteen pounds. I would find myself sedated and tied to a bed somewhere, waiting for a psych evaluation to determine which institution they would lock me in for the rest of my natural life.

Some implicit span of time must have passed, since my ‘auto-pilot’ kicked in once more and my fingers nimbly took my hair out of the curlers and brushed it out expertly into a windblown but very stylish flyaway which framed my heart-shaped face beautifully. Apparently the ghost had an innate sense of style – the hairdo did not seem dated or antique at all, but rather very new and modern.

I wished I still had access to the diary. Maybe I could read ahead, figure out what might be in store for me. Find out something more about this

woman. Was Stephanie really my name, or just the convenient feminine version of my real name? What spirit possessed me?

The 'auto-pilot' seemed to respond a little bit to my wondering. My body stood gracefully and padded across the creaking hardwood into the hallway outside, steering me helplessly around a corner into a little alcove which once housed a telephone back in the 1950s. I puffed my cigarette, holding it up even with my face as I walked in a strutting little sashay worthy of any catwalk and leaving a rising trail of smoke behind me. On the wall in the telephone alcove hung an antique portrait photograph in an oval frame, a young woman smiling happily into the camera, her bleach-blonde hair in little finger waves, bobbed short in the style of the Roaring Twenties.



I ran my fingertips across the yellowed glass in the frame. *Is this me?* I thought to myself.

*Emily. My name was Emily Cabot. I left home when I was fifteen years old to escape an abusive stepfather. My birth father had been a Presbyterian*

*minister, killed by tuberculosis when I was only seven years old. Oldest of seven, three girls and four boys.*

I gasped in realization. The diary. Emily's diary. *My* diary. If there were to be any answers to why I now inhabited the body of a turn-of-the-century prostitute and my will no longer seemed to be entirely my own, those answers would dwell in those aging pages.

I tried to run back to the bathroom where I'd left the diary, but could only manage that hip-swiveling sashay from earlier. At least my body seemed to obey me for the time being. Maybe it would even let me read a little while in peace before it forced me into its next adventure.

I only hoped Emily didn't have plans for me to take up her old profession. I had more than enough to adjust to for one night. I didn't think I could handle any more.

I WOKE UP GROGGY AND spitting out blonde hair from my mouth. Morning sun peeked through the window blinds across my bed, lighting the litter of books and magazines across my covers. I'd fought with myself off and on all night until sleep claimed me, struggling to read the diary and what few books of local history and folklore I could find in the house's small library and gain more information on my terrifying transformation while the spirit possessing me fought back, wanting only to read fashion magazines and pick up modern slang and speech from interminably watching television shows such as *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* and *Real Housewives*. Hoping not to end up sounding like an overprivileged bitch, I managed to exercise some control and talk the ghost into picking up what it could from *Dallas Cowboys Cheerleaders: Making the Team*. At least those girls seemed genuinely sweet and caring. The ghost had acquiesced, managing to 'practice' her speech (by repeating every word it heard on the show in my new, high-pitched little Lolita voice) while allowing me to read at the same time, accomplishing two things at once.

The diary had only detailed Emily's heartfelt embracing of prostitution as her vocation. Over the next two years of entries, her sense of wonder at every new sexual experience faded away and her descriptions of the assignments became more and more jaded. I began to think she had become yet another one of the stereotypical world-weary hookers portrayed in every *film noir* movie I'd ever seen until I read an entry dated about three years into her career.

*January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1912*

*Dear Diary,*

*The day to day business of the house continues as usual, and my new additions seem to be working out very handily. Louise's suggestion that we hire on a few colored girls has worked out very well. Many of my white customers apparently have nursed a longing for that dark embrace and now ask for Calpurnia and Annie by name. They are sweet girls, and clean. I have been more than satisfied by their work, and they seem to like it here.*

*Something of note did occur this week, however, which bears mentioning. A new entrepreneur has moved into our small town, a man named Andrew Slayton who owns a small company making farm implements. I had expected, when I first heard of him, that he would be a rough rural sort of low education and poor manners. I must say, I was pleasantly surprised. Estelle introduced me to him upon his first week in town and I could not have been more mistaken in my imaginings. This gentleman was refined and very cultured, worldly and mannerly. I must confess he quite thoroughly charmed both Estelle and myself in the short meeting we had. He was handsome and very charming, witty and clever. I could not believe he was as yet unmarried, but when I told him so he simply told me that his paramour had been his burgeoning business.*

*I have not wished, Diary, that a man take me by my hand and allow me to lead him up to my boudoir in quite some days. When he placed his hand in mine, Diary, I felt altogether giddy and a little breathless, like a little girl with her first beau. Behind our closed doors, any artfulness or guile I have developed in my few years as a fallen woman disappeared quite shockingly. I have foregone the business of kissing in my occupation – finding that most of my customers do not wish it and neither do I – but this time I could not imagine an assignation with Mr. Slayton which did not begin with that tender meeting of lips. He made me tremble in a way I have not felt since my very first tryst with lovely Doris so many years ago. I have come to terms with the wanton and carnal feelings which rise in me when in the presence of men, but this man made me feel differently. Could I possibly have feelings of tenderness towards him, a feeling I had believed dead in my heart? I think it is so, Diary. Even now, still warm from laying beneath a man whose name I cannot even remember and sore from his rutting, I think of Mr. Slayton and his kind eyes, and I find myself overwhelmed with desire to see him again.*

I sat back against the headboard and closed my eyes in thought. Emily fell in love? I was sure stranger things could have happened, but her blasé descriptions of her clients led me to believe that she disdained feelings. I mean, her writing about “wanton and carnal” feelings played out – reading her descriptions, Emily had not been forced into anything with these men. In fact, she tended to be a little more than they could handle sometimes,

mauling them and tearing off their clothes in her desire to satisfy her own lust. Emily was a very horny girl, probably the best suited for a life of prostitution I could imagine. But love? Somehow that seemed a bit far-fetched. I turned another brittle page and attempted to read more, but my body's hijacker seemed to have other ideas.

My pillowy lips whistled a little tune I had never heard before as my body rose and moved to the little vanity table I had dragged into my room last night. My new, expanded backside still made me feel eerily like I sat on an inflatable stadium cushion as I perched on the low stool and lit a cigarette. Fear of cancer and emphysema no longer even registered in my mind, it seemed so natural now. A lifelong habit, placing the filter between my soft lips and striking the match, the first acrid taste of the hot smoke against my throat, the palpable easing of the tensions of *not* smoking easing inside me, like knots being released from a taut cord. I hummed and smoked as my hands arranged my hair and makeup, having digested the information gathered from the piles of *Elle* and *Allure* and *Glamour* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines piled on the bed to style myself very slick and modern. Like any of a hundred chic and trendy young women I saw in cars and on city streets every single day.

My fingers dug in the little jewelry box I had found and came out with a set of enormous hoop earrings, at least four inches in diameter, and my lips parted in a satisfied and delighted smile. I remember having felt a flash of desire upon seeing them in a picture in one of the magazines I perused last night (and just why did Stuart own so many women's magazines and keep them in his house, anyway, I wondered idly) and wondering if I had a pair just like them. I threaded the posts through holes in my earlobes expertly, fastening them with a soft *click* of finality to dangle and tug against my ears and tap gently against my neck. I regarded them in the mirror from multiple angles and felt a girlish thrill at the way they looked. I understood completely as I looked numbly at the delighted smile on my pretty face – the giant hoops were now a trademark. My signature look. I should get used to them quickly, since they would dangle from my ears from every waking hour from now on.

I pulled on a loose pair of pink yoga pants and a tank-top, gathering my blonde hair into a ponytail and wiggling my feet into a pair of pink socks and then a pair of women's running shoes. I could only pause to wonder for a moment why Stuart would have such a comprehensive selection of women's clothing in his house, along with the makeup and hair products and magazines, all of which miraculously fit me. Was this some function of the ghostly transformation. Were these things just appearing around me to suit my new body? Was Emily somehow calling them to herself?

That couldn't be. She used my hands to pick up a *Shape* magazine from the bed and flip through it again, as if to refresh her memory, looking at the stretching exercises and a rather intense workout for her abs and backside. Exercise simply for exercise's sake had never once occurred to Emily. She exercised simply by living at the turn of the twentieth century – walking everywhere she went, her days filled with manual labor even as a prostitute – but she had never run for the sake of cardiovascular exercise, or targeted a workout to a specific area of her body, or ever exercised with the intention of increasing health or losing weight. All of this was new territory and she had examined the two or three issues of *Shape* and *Women's Health* she found with a great deal of curiosity. Still, she trotted down the stairs happily, still humming some long-forgotten tune, and went into the small but very well equipped home gymnasium on the ground floor happily, looking forward to trying this strange new thing. It took no insight to interpret her enthusiasm – this is a thing that sexy girls *did* in the twenty-first century. Therefore, she would do it as well and learn to love it and be very good at it.

I had thought, for a moment, that my bad left knee would limit Emily's attempts to exercise or that somehow the smoking and drinking from last night would hamper it. Anything to discourage Emily at this point would have given me hope, just to see that something could stop this ghost who had hijacked my body so utterly. But she tore through the workout from the magazine with no problems and not the slightest twinge of discomfort from my knee. She launched into some other calisthenics taken from the magazines and ended with a brisk four-mile run – breasts bouncing exuberantly – on the treadmill. Her transformation of my body into hers had yielded a very healthy, lithe and strong result.



I couldn't help but chuckle inwardly (the sound never reached my physical lips, not with Emily so completely in control of me as she was) at the irony of watching myself in the floor-to-ceiling mirror behind the dance *barre* on the wall, toweling the sweat from my face and neck and then lighting a cigarette immediately before my body had even cooled down from the exertion. She then scampered me back upstairs to repair my sweat-melted makeup and brush out dampened blonde hair.

I thought idly that maybe this girl should learn to bathe and do her hair *after* she worked out every day and save herself having to do everything twice, like most women did, and I nearly jumped with the shock as I felt Emily's consciousness seize on to the idea – *my* idea – and take it as her own. She could hear my thoughts! There was literally no part of me she did not have access to, no place of privacy or solitude left to me. A rising swell of panic overtook my mind and I think, mentally, I must have jibbered and ranted and screamed pointlessly inside my own consciousness for several minutes. Not that Emily's consciousness seemed to mind. She just went on about her day as if nothing were out of

the ordinary, that she woke up in another person's body a hundred years after her own death every day.

But maybe nothing was out of the ordinary for her. Maybe she had been planning this takeover for over a century. The carefree happiness exuding from her resident personality radiated contentment and satisfaction with her situation. I found myself thinking this was *exactly* what she'd planned.

But how did she manage to pilfer my memories? How did she take advice from my private thoughts?

The answer, obvious as it was, terrified me.

Because we were not two separate entities. She had taken my body and changed it to suit her own; it only stood to reason she would do the same with my mind. I was Emily, and Emily was me. The skills and memories and desires, those were not external to me. They were *my* memories and desires, my skills, implanted in me by whatever force changed me. My insistence that those things belonged to another was just my mind's way of coping with the shock, making my unbelievable circumstances make some sort of sense.

Of equal concern to me was the little caches of feminine things I kept finding secreted around the house. Boxes of jewelry and stacks of magazines. A carton of extra-long Virginia Slims 120's cigarettes, marketed specifically for women, in the kitchen. Tampons in the bathroom. Baskets of cosmetics. Several purses in a hall closet. Like somehow, Stuart had been laying in a stockpile over time, waiting for a woman to inhabit this house.

Clad only in a pair of pink panties with black lace trim and a matching bra (size 34D, I noticed with some shock), I wended my way through the house with that trademark sashay, my overlarge posterior tracing tempting infinities in the air behind me, poking my nose into this little closet and that, finding what little secret stashes of femininity Stuart left hidden around his palatial home. I pawed through a few closets stuffed to bursting with women's clothing and shoes in all shapes and colors and textures, all emblazoned with labels testifying to their expense and taste: Diór, St. Laurent, Chanel, Balenciaga, Prada, Gucci and Versace.



I decided, finally, that my house – strange that I no longer considered it *Stuart's* house in my mind – truly was a treasure trove, but it still lacked something. Something very palpable and heavy in my mind. I closed long-lashed green eyes in recollection, trying to think back across the years to the house's heyday, wondering what was missing which made that home less complete in my mind than this home. Images flooded my mind's eye, in rapid succession – parties with the champagne glasses clinking and the tinny warbling of the gramophone, the soft swish of silk and the merry laughter, the sexual undertones beneath the witty conversations, the bright smiles and the coy winks. The voices, topping one over the other in intertwined conversations.

The voices. The women's voices.

*I miss my friends.*

This house, I realized, had always been at maximum occupancy, full to the rafters of beautiful and glamorous women, odors of perfume and sexual musk in the hallways and tittering laughter echoing late into the night.

Names like *Doris* and *Estelle* and *Calpurnia* skittered across my mind, leaving a lonely ache in their wake.

A girl needs friends, I decided. I did not even pause at the thought of myself described accurately by the noun “girl.” My femininity did not shock me any more. I found the telephone charging in its plastic cradle in the living room and picked it up, chewing my bottom lip apprehensively as I considered calling my own friends. I had plenty of buddies in town, guys I had known in college who were fun to hang out with. I just wasn't sure how they would take me now, with my D-cup breasts and my long blonde hair and my sexy little voice and swollen, 'cocksucking' lips. All the guys I knew were definitely players and would not hesitate to try and hook up with such a sweet little blonde number as myself. Our relationships would lapse quickly from drinking buddies into predator and prey, and that was not something I particularly wanted right now. I didn't miss my paramours – I missed my friends.

Still, thoughts of being pursued by men and taken to their beds evoked a different feeling in me, something raw and powerful and immediate enough to chase my own wistful reminiscence from my head and change my focus to the nagging emptiness between my silky thighs. A part of me dimly registered that it had been over a century since I'd enjoyed a good hard cock, and a girl had her needs. Images slammed through my imagination of my lithe body laying back underneath a strong man, legs spread wide and covered in mingled sweat, grunting and squealing like a wild animal, clawing at his back and moaning his name...

The bra and panties quickly slid down my body to the floor and I lay back on the bed, my smoldering cigarette forgotten in a bedside ashtray. Long-nailed fingers found and teased oh-so-sensitive nipples to delicious erection on my firm chest, the barest touch of them sending little thrilling frissons of pleasure up and down my body, leaving pebbled gooseflesh in their wake. I lay there and panted, letting the part of me transformed by the ghost 'do the driving' as nimble and elegant fingers traced a caressing line down my flat belly and into the warm, wet velvet void between my legs.

The first touch of my fingers against my clitoris shot my eyes open wide and brought a high-pitched scream to my lips. I never knew the human body was capable of such sensation! No wonder Emily chose the path she chose, inhabiting a body like this with its overwhelming sensuality. I doubted my own ability to keep from spending a happy lifetime flat on my back with an endless succession of faceless men with hard cocks lining up to service me and satisfy my soul-deep hunger for sexual gratification. The fingers traced lazy little circles, first one direction and then the other, spiraling my ecstasy upwards and upwards to a point where I truly believed

my head might explode from pure pleasure. I moaned and screamed and thrashed my head in the soft nest of my tousled hair, wanting only release.

*To hell with it*, I thought with wild abandon as I grabbed for the phone and dialed it with a polished thumbnail, my other hand never stopping its marvelous ministrations to my aching clit. If I couldn't have my friends around me, I could at least make a healthy start on that long line of hard cocks.

It didn't occur to me that my buddies might not know who the hell I was if I identified myself, but details such as those had no room in my feverish brain, crowded out by my sexual hunger and desire for orgasm. The phone rang three or four times as I fought to bring my voice under control, then a grumbly tenor voice answered the line.

“Hello?”

“Hey, Gene? It's Stephanie,” I opened, hoping that he didn't respond by saying he had no clue who I was. I should have trusted the ghost, the whole nature of the transformation. If the name and picture and gender on my driver's license had changed (as it had when I checked it last night), surely the magic or the otherworldly entity had made provisions to change the memories of the people who knew me, as well.

“Hey, Steph, what's happening?” Gene answered.

“Not much,” I said, trying not to gasp as my orgasm neared – a feeling like a rain barrel quickly reaching its fullness deep inside my belly, about to brim over. “You got plans?”



“Am I supposed to?” Gene asked.

“Monday Night Football,” I said, not really even knowing why. “You want to come watch the game over here, on the 60-inch?”

Gene chuckled richly. “You’re the only girl I know that gets excited about Monday Night Football.”

“You know I love the Patriots,” I said, biting my lip to keep from squealing as my fingers found a particularly delightful spot and massaged it. “So, you in or out?”

“In,” Gene said.

“Call Tim and Nick, too,” I told him, some of my gasps becoming audible for the first time.

“Okay,” he said. “You doing okay? You sound out of breath.”

“Just got off the treadmill,” I lied glibly. “See you tonight.”

“Yeah, sounds like fun. See you,” Gene said, and the line went dead. A second later, my body electrified as the rain barrel inside me finally overflowed. I screamed until I could draw no more breath, my body shuddering and bucking uncontrollably. My mind scoured itself completely empty of the slightest thought as waves of pleasure I could scarcely conceive broke repeatedly through my body. As soon as the first climax ebbed, leaving me breathless and exhausted, another stepped up right on its heels and took me back to that wild cacophony of utter ecstasy from before. I sagged afterwards, my fingers stopping their wild stroking, but I felt the very real potential for a third, and a fourth, and on and on until my brain and body could literally take no more.

“Jesus,” I breathed, reaching to the bedside table for a cigarette. “I... I had... I had no *idea* I could... that *anyone* could... Jesus. Oh, Jesus.”

As I breathed in the acrid smoke – well, no longer acrid, not any more, now tasting delicious to me and very welcome – and released it in a plume to curl sexily around my slowly rotating ceiling fan, I felt the first real weight of Emily's addiction, now passed on in totality to me. Not just the booze and the cigarettes – although those were obviously powerful addictions as well – but the addiction to sensuality and orgasm. I knew with absolute certainty I would never be able to go long without needing to cum like that, again and again. If I wasn't climaxing, I would be thinking about climax – *wanting* to climax, *needing* to climax. A short session with my long-nailed fingers and I would never be the same again.

I smoked my cigarette in a wonderfully satisfied state of contentment, running fingers through my soft hair and looking at the treetops swaying gently in the breeze outside my window, wondering if Stuart had thought to squirrel away a secret cache of vibrators somewhere in his little hiding places for me.

\* \* \*

I soaked in my warm bath, luxuriating in that most feminine of pastimes, just letting the water and steam, scented with lilac and lavender, soak into my skin and pull me into a delightful torpor. I sipped at a glass of bourbon which clinked with ice and sucked languorously on one of my extra-long, slender women's cigarettes while I leafed through the tattered leatherbound diary taken from my bedside table. I seemed to have won some kind of fight inside my head – my original urge had been to read an article about hairstyles in an issue of *Glamour* I found beside the toilet that morning, but I had forced myself to set it aside and opt for the diary instead. I was glad

that I won the struggle. The diary had more to teach me. About myself. It was not lost on me that the diary told me my very own life story. It seemed to make me make more sense, somehow.

There was something strange about one passage, enough to pique my interest through my listless haze of sexual satiation and sit me forward a bit, sloshing the fragrant water between my breasts. I dried my hands quickly on the pink "Hers" towel that was now forever mine so I could turn the pages without concern for ruining the delicate ink, and read quickly.

March 8<sup>th</sup>, 1912

*Dear Diary,*

*Andrew visited me again last night. I wish I could be free of the strange power he seems to have over me. It frightens me. I was entertaining Mr. Holt, a very influential businessman and very likely our future mayor. One of the sort of client for whom it is most sensible to keep happy. A normal woman, in possession of her good sense, would have told Andrew to wait and stayed with her more important client. But when Doris peeked around the door and told me Andrew had arrived, like a lovesick ninny, I excused myself and found another woman to entertain Mr. Holt while I ran to him.*

*What is happening to me, dear Diary? I can understand love. I can understand tenderness. What I cannot understand is the utter abandonment of my sanity in the presence of this man. Oh, how I wish I could go back to the way it was before I met him. Just servicing gentlemen and then bidding them fare-thee-well. No lasting connections.*

*Estelle keeps laying more and more of the responsibilities of the day-to-day running of the house. I think she fancies me Heiress Apparent to the Throne of Madam. My feelings on the matter are mixed. It is nice to have access to the money and making such important decisions. I still enjoy the occasional girlhood fantasy of raising a child of my own, and the role of madam does afford me the pretense that I have a house full of beautiful, charming daughters. Such thoughts bring a smile to my face even on my dreariest days.*

*I have hired a young man from the town to tend to the house's new automobile. I do not know if my choice is a wise one, however – I do not feel comfortable at the way he looks at me. I am used to being regarded as a low woman, or viewed with lust, but this fellow... he seems to look at me as some sort of goddess. Like I am some kind of unattainable goal. I do not enjoy being adored so. I plan on telling him to stop, but I am certain*

*such talk would break the poor lad's heart. I feel quite beside myself. Perhaps Andrew will know what to do, or might speak to him on my behalf.*

*Dear Heaven! Listen to me! Relying on a man to tend to my personal affairs like some feather-brained schoolgirl. What has that man done to me?*

A small, wrinkled photograph slipped from between the next pages as I turned. It was a happy scene, a portrait of the household at the time. Estelle, now in a wheelchair from a withering bout of tuberculosis, and Emily, and faces I recognized as Doris, Calpurnia, Esther, Hilde, Mary Elizabeth, and others. But my eyes were drawn inexorably to the young, lanky man standing in the corner of the posed shot, a battered porkpie hat on his head, clad only in shirtsleeves and suspenders. Something about his face seemed incredibly familiar, striking a chord inside my head which I could not quite place.

I pondered the photograph until I smoked the rest of my pack of cigarettes and my bathwater cooled. I took note of the time on the little brass clock above the mirror and gasped. Kickoff was in two hours. I would just have enough time to doll myself up for my friends before they got here.

I brushed my hair out in lieu of drying it with hot air – I liked how soft the air-dry made it – and enjoyed the cool dampness against my neck as I sponged out a coat of foundation on my face and neck. I followed it with dramatic eyeliner and several coats of dark mascara on my long lashes (I felt a surge of pride at how I never needed fake eyelashes to look like a movie star), a light dusting of blush to make my cheekbones defined, and a generous application of bubblegum pink lipstick with a high, wet-look gloss. A bit of mousse in my hair for body and a drop or two of Chanel No. 5 dabbed on my pulse points to give myself a sultry, ready-for-action scent, and it was time for the closet.

I wanted to dress to seduce, but Monday Night Football seemed a bit low-brow for lingerie and an evening gown. I opted instead for a pair of skin-tight faded designer jeans with a black leather belt sporting a silver heart-shaped buckle, knee-high suede boots, a slinky one-shoulder top with a glittery gold foil lipstick kiss across the breasts. It didn't dull my ardor beneath the surface, though – my casual but sexy look covered over a black push-up bra which shoved my luscious breasts together into a tempting cleft, matching g-string panties and thigh-high black stockings. I dangled my signature giant hoop earrings from my ears and just had time to give myself an approving look in the mirror when the doorbell rang. I took my freshly-lit cigarette and trotted downstairs to the door.



I swung the thick oaken door back on silent hinges to reveal my three college buddies – memories of myself drinking beer bong at fraternity parties warred inside my head with noticing that Gene had a really cute smile and Tim's jeans bulged nicely over a sizeable package – standing on the doorstep, holding pizza and beer and chips for the night's game. Gene was the shortest of the lot – still a half-head taller than myself – with wavy chestnut hair and dimples. Tim stood behind him, shy and lanky, with pale skin and red hair and a generous smattering of freckles across his boyish face. His shyness made him more attractive to me, fostering a desire to get to know him better and spend time alone with him. I could not be sure that he had not cultivated that aspect of himself simply to draw girls closer to him. At the back was ruddy-skinned Nick, his Salvadoran heritage emphasized in his swarthy complexion and his thick black hair. I'd only heard tales of the legendary sexual prowess of Latin lovers – even in my former career of the early 1900s I had never shared a bed with one – and his quiet machismo and confidence drew me in and brought a hint of musky, wet warmth to my flimsy panties. I took a sultry drag from my

cigarette as I regarded them for a moment – I expected a great deal of fun tonight – and then invited them in.

“Hey, guys,” I said brightly.

“What's up, Steph?” Gene asked, stepping in and giving me a short embrace. My breasts flattened against his well-muscled chest.

“Oh, you know,” I told him. “Same old same old. Looking for work, like always.”

“I can't believe nobody's hired you yet,” Tim said, after clearing his throat nervously. “I mean, we have the same degree. I found a job, like, three weeks out of school. Doesn't seem fair. You got a higher GPA than I did and everything.”

“Oh, it's no big deal,” I told him, rubbing his arm companionably but making sure I got a very informative feel of the hard, corded muscles along his forearm through the sleeve of his hoodie. “I'll find something. I can always get a job waiting tables if I have to.”

Nick snorted. “Girls with journalism degrees don't wait tables,” he stated flatly. “Send me your résumé. I can pass it around to HR at work tomorrow. See if there's something for you at my office.”

*I have a degree in journalism?* I wondered, a little shocked. *I thought my degree was in psychology.*

I kissed his cheek dryly. “You are *such* a sweetheart,” I told him. “I'll email it to you later, okay? I don't want to think about jobs right now. Tonight it's about watching the Pats kick the hell out of Pittsburgh.”

“You and your damn Patriots,” Tim snorted derisively. “If it had *anything* to do with the actual team and not your crush on Tom Brady, I might take you seriously.”

I laughed. “I don't make any secret about my thing for Brady,” I told him. “And yet they still keep winning football games. I wonder what that's about?”

“C'mon, settle down,” Gene bade us all. “Like anybody expects the Steelers to win tonight. Steph gets to have her special moment and we get to drink beer and play fantasy football. Let's go sit down. Game's about to start.”

I led the boys into the TV room and brought the enormous flatscreen to life. We opened beers and started in on the pizza – I only took a few little nibbles, ever conscious of my waistline, curbing my appetite with cigarettes instead.

“I really wish you wouldn't smoke those things,” Tim chided. “You know they're gonna kill you one day, right?”

I gave him a coy look. “So if I quit right now, I'll live forever?”

“Leave her alone,” Nick interceded. “She's a big girl. If she wants to smoke cigarettes, then let her smoke cigarettes. They're no worse for you than all those cheeseburgers you pound down every day.”

“Thank you,” I told Nick in mock gratitude. “See? Somebody appreciates me.”

We joked and teased one another back and forth like that – like the old buddies we were – throughout the pre-game show and then sat in companionable silence for the first few minutes of gameplay. If not for the growing wetness and sensitivity in my nether regions, or the subtle bounce of my breasts as I cheered a particularly dramatic play, or the stray thought of how cute I would look in a Patriots cheerleader uniform, I could have forgotten the fantastic and terrifying events of the past few days and imagined myself back in Alpha Chi house, on the couch watching pro ball and trading verbal jabs with my buddies over beer and pizza, wholeheartedly and unashamedly male.

The part of me instilled by the spirit of Emily scanned my friends continuously, though, sorting through their laughter and comments seeking altogether different information to process. Tim continuously looked up from his fantasy football app on his phone when he thought I wasn't looking and stared hungrily at my breasts. Gene kept stretching, claiming a sore shoulder from his workout, but it inched him closer and closer to me on the couch every time he did it. Nick positioned himself strategically in an armchair which afforded him the very best view of my backside when I bent to fetch another beer from the cooler for anyone who ran dry. Oh, yes. We were buddies only because these boys felt it was the best they could do with me. Any one of them would take more if I offered it.

And I had every intention of offering.

The game quickly lapsed into the boring – it turned into a rout by the end of the second quarter, the Patriots shellacking the Steelers – and we paid less and less attention to the game and more and more attention to one

another. I decided that subtle flirtation would be lost on these boys – sweet as they were, none of them qualified as refined or genteel – and the way of the modern age seemed to discourage men from being direct about what they wanted. I decided that if I did not make the first move, then no move would be made.

I stood up as halftime was called. “Scuse me, fellas, but I need to visit the little girls' room. Be right back. Anybody need anything while I'm up?”

Tim stifled a belch. “Probably more beer,” he said. “You know how these alcoholics pound 'em down.”

“Like your pale Irish ass isn't responsible for half that cooler being empty,” Nick shot back.

“More beer, got it,” I said as I left the room. I stayed true to my word, pausing in the downstairs bathroom to let the warm rush of urine flow out of me gratefully, still a little amazed at the sensation of peeing straight down with no ability to aim. When I finished, remembering to wipe myself with a little wad of paper, I simply continued undressing. I sashayed through the kitchen and picked up a six-pack of the imported beer Stuart left me wearing only my stockings, my boots and my matching bra and panties. I walked back into the living room silently and drew no attention, the boys facing away from me and engaged in a rapt discussion of their fantasy football draftees.

I set the beer down heavily on an end table, letting the bottles clink and drawing the eyes of all my old college friends to me. The conversation died in mid-word at the sight of me clad only in black lingerie and a seductive smile. I put one hand high on the doorpost, showing off my lovely breasts to excellent effect, and cocked a coquettish eyebrow at them.

“A girl could get old waiting for one of you boys to make a move,” I told them directly, my voice husky with pent-up arousal. “Or are you more interested in the second half?”

“Jesus, Steph,” Gene stammered, a little breathless. “You never said it was... like *that*.”

“I didn't think I had to,” I purred, twisting a lock of blonde hair around one finger playfully. “You guys are pretty damn thickheaded, I hope you know that.”

“All of us?” Tim choked.

“I can't make up my mind,” I said honestly. “You're all sexy and cute as hell, and all for different reasons. So I finally figured, 'why pick just one?' I mean, we're friends, right? We can handle this and not get jealous or weird, right? 'Cause I'm not looking to fall in love with any of you guys. I just am really in the mood for some fun. What do you guys think?”

They didn't answer with words, but their eyes spoke volumes. They all stood in unison, walking towards me, and I turned my face upwards to accept a passionate kiss from each of them in turn. They were exactly what I expected them to be – Gene's was boisterous and grasping, hungry; Tim's shy and apprehensive at first but growing in desire; Nick's hard and masterful and leaving me quite weak in the knees when he finally broke away.



The feeling of having a ready, willing and able man in whichever direction I turned thrilled me in a way long forgotten. Lips pressed into mine in such rapid succession that I lost track of which lips belonged to which man, and hands explored my flesh. My fingers un-tucked shirts and pried apart belt buckles and stroked rapidly stiffening manhoods through rough denim. I

scarcely even needed to concentrate, much less plan. I had only to hold out my hand or pucker my lips and an eager crotch pressed against it or a hungry mouth covered it. Lips found my neck as talented fingers – I think they were Tim's – found my breasts and teased my nipples stiff beneath the satin and lace. The familiar emptiness in my middle yawned open anew, wanting so *acutely* to be filled, and I knew my addiction had recurred in full strength.

Without hesitation, I sank to my knees with feline grace, looking up at their faces with eager anticipation. “You know what I want,” I purred to them all. “I've been dreaming of this. Give it to me.”

“All at the same time?” Nick asked, his customary bravado lost in the face of my wanton lust.

“All at the same time,” I said. “I've always fantasized about that. I want to see what it's like.” A kind lie. I didn't have the heart to tell any of them that I had blown a group of five overweight Italian railroad executives in this very room back in 1914 for the tidy sum of forty dollars cash. I think it might have put them off.

They freed their softly throbbing cocks from denim prisons and let them bob gently above my upturned face for a while in breathless anticipation. Memories surfaced in me, of being taught how to do this by a young Norwegian whore named Hilde on a carrot, then a cucumber, then a very lucky stableboy. I suppressed a girlish giggle of delight. Of all the things I did as a prostitute, all the depraved acts I had been paid to perform, the simple act of taking a cock into my mouth and bringing a man such unselfish, generous pleasure still topped the list as my favorite. I had done it often enough with men I did not even know, much less admire or like. To be able to do it for men whom I *did* care about, men whom I *did* like – that was pleasure indeed.

I took Nick's prodigious member in one hand and Tim's long but slender one in the other, stroking them gently. My lips parted with a soft sigh of pure pleasure and I leaned onto the squat but well-formed cock in the center, dangling between Gene's legs, and took him gingerly into my throat. I circulated from one to the other to the other, making them slick and ready with my spit, before opening my throat like a yawn and pistoning my head up and down on each of them in turn, using my face like a makeshift pussy and fucking them deep into my throat. Their groans and gasps inflamed me, making me want to perform more and more lasciviously, to give them that elusive 'porno' experience that so many men longed for but so few actually experienced.

As much as I loved what I did, the wet void between my thighs would not be denied much longer. I fished in the drawer of an end table and drew out a long string of colored condoms – the articles on safe sex in the women's magazines had not been lost on Emily's ghost, having seen firsthand the vagaries of venereal disease and unwanted pregnancy on her friends and co-workers in the early twentieth century. I rolled one down the impressive length of Nick's beautiful circumcised cock and rose from my knees gracefully, locking my eyes on his.

Wordlessly, I bent over the arm of the couch, and tugged gently at Nick's protected penis to bring him around behind me. I placed the warm, slick head of his cock against my waiting pussy and whispered a raspy “fuck me” before turning my attention – and my hungry mouth – back to Tim and Gene.

Nick slid into me all at once – he met no resistance, so wet I was – and made me gasp around a mouth full of Tim's insistent erection. The emptiness inside me finally felt *filled*. It was glorious. He started pumping into me slowly, but I did not wish for things like slow and gentle right now. A wild animalistic desire had built in me since the moment they walked in my door, and I needed it released. I thrust my hips back against him roughly, quick and sharp, and began squealing and screaming my desire around the invaders between my lips, the screams and moans stopped glottally whenever Tim or Gene would push themselves so far down my open throat that they stopped all air and sound from escaping.

With a grip on my waist which would doubtlessly leave bruises come the morning, Nick thrust himself deep inside me and grunted, the fronts of his thighs shaking and spasming against the backs of my own as he filled the condom with his release, deep in my belly. He sagged against me and I rose up, kissing him awkwardly over one shoulder, while tearing a condom open with my hands and rolling it onto Tim. I lay back on the sofa, legs spread wide, and guided Tim to kneel in front of me while Gene straddled my hips with his feet and guided his own cock back into my waiting throat. Tim, for all he was the smaller of the two, fucked much better – his long and slender cock seemed to reach all the right places and he innately knew how to vary his rhythm and angle in such a way that first one, then two, then three screaming, panting orgasms ripped their way through me. Each orgasm made me scream a little louder, which gave Gene the barest hairsbreadth more room to push himself down my throat, until finally he placed his hands on the back of my head and pushed until his warm, hairy balls rested against my smooth chin. I grabbed his firm ass with both hands and pulled him further – unable to breathe around the large obstruction in my throat, but suffocating happily – into my mouth as Tim sawed into me like a man possessed.

Gene pushed in and out of my face like he fucked a girl, finally stiffening and crying out in a rising arpeggio. Hot, salted jets of fluid splashed against my tongue and the back of my throat, filling me with taste and lovely satisfaction, and I swallowed dutifully. I distractedly registered that Hilde had helped me discover, with the kind assistance of the local stableboy, that I was one of those very lucky girls who did not mind swallowing a man's seed because she actually liked the taste. So many of the other whores needed to rinse their mouths clean with water or whiskey to rid themselves of the taste – some even became physically nauseated by the taste – or simply held it in their mouths long enough to spit it into a basin in a most unladylike way. Some girls even let the men spend themselves all over their faces or their breasts, but risked having the fluid clot and solidify in their hair and require them to bathe anew. I felt very lucky that I never had to deal with such problems. Sure, some clients asked if they could cum on my face or my breasts and were willing to pay extra for the privilege, so I had experienced it firsthand, but I much preferred my mouth full of the salty, thick and impossibly masculine flavor of it.

Just as the last vestiges of flavor left my mouth, Tim brought me to one more shuddering orgasm and then spent himself inside me, silent and withdrawn in orgasm as he was in conversation. I sagged against the couch, my hair damp around my face with sexual sweat, and could not keep the smile from my face. I had satisfied my need for a hard and ready man, three times over. With that desire satisfied, though, I felt the acute and painful loneliness for my lost friends – the other girls of my house – slam into me unabated. Tears threatened to well up in my eyes, and I made an excuse to leave for a moment lest these boys see me weep.

I went upstairs to the bathroom where it all began, missing Doris and her nimble tongue and quick heartfelt smile, or Esther and her love of poetry and her rhapsodic soul so much it hurt physically, like a wound in my chest. I only just made the top of the stairs when I seized upon an idea.

NOTHING IN THE WORLD TASTED quite so good to me – or to Emily, perhaps, but it was definitely growing on me – as a cigarette right after sex. The boys all snored softly on my couch in the front room, completely exhausted from the exertion of trying to satisfy me. They gave it their very best – each of them fucking me in my eager pussy and wet mouth, by turns – but in the end, the feminine conquered the masculine as it always does. I padded back and forth through the house naked, on bare feet, making myself a coffee with a generous helping of whiskey thrown in and repairing my wrecked makeup.

As I walked through the hallway overlooking the swimming pool outside, my eye caught upon three matching picture frames, each hung one under the other along the window which looked out on the patio. All three frames were empty, holding nothing but black paper, and I stood for a while, running long-nailed fingers along the frames, *certain* in my mind that something should be inside them, some memory which was meant to be but had not happened yet. The empty frames brought the lack of friendship home to me painfully, like a fist closing tight inside my chest, and I looked down at the little basket of things I'd retrieved from upstairs and closed my eyes, wishing like a little girl that my strange theory proved to be true. I had no idea what even gave me the inclination to try this strange experiment. Perhaps some mystic knowledge imparted to me by Emily's ghost.



Early morning sun peeked through the shades into my house as I threw on a robe – open, to leave myself exposed, since even though the soreness between my legs and the stiffness in my abused jaw testified to the fulfillment of my sexual appetite, I still could not get enough of boys *looking*. I placed soft hands on each sleeping shoulder and woke the

boys one by one, smiling down at their muzzy faces and sleep-gummed eyes as they yawned and stretched themselves awake.

“Good morning,” I bade them all happily. “I made coffee if you're interested.”

“How can you be so goddamned cheerful?” Gene groaned, knuckling his back.

“Because I got the bejeezus fucked out of me last night,” I said contentedly. “How the hell could I *not* be in a good mood?”

Gene smiled. “Glad you enjoyed yourself.”

“Don't think I was the only one, there, tiger,” I teased.

It was Tim – shy, bashful Tim – who had the presence of mind to give me a kiss, morning breath notwithstanding, and whisper a genuine and heartfelt “thank you” into my soft blonde hair. I clasped him tight against my naked body, feeling an all-too-familiar desire rise in my midsection. Of all the boys had done for me last night, all the exciting little quirks and gifts they possessed in the bedroom, I think Tim was the one I ran the most risk of falling for. I made a mental note to myself to be careful around him.

The boys dressed partially and walked shirtless through my house, allowing me a pleasant morning feast of looking at the subtle interplay of hard muscles under taut skin, as they raided my modern kitchen for coffee and breakfast.

“What do you have going on today, Steph?” Nick asked me nonchalantly as he buttered a piece of toast. I stood at the range, idly scrambling eggs for them, completely safe and happy in the role of 'little woman,' making breakfast for *my boys*, feeling equal parts motherly (a strange sensation to say the least) and turned on by their bodies and the memories of last night's debauchery.

“Not much,” I said. “Looking for work. I need to go into town at some point – I have grocery shopping to do. I need to work out and take a shower, that kind of thing. I was even considering getting myself a manicure.”

“Rough life,” Gene teased.

“What about you?” I returned.

“Work,” Gene grunted. “All I ever do. Work, work, work.”

“Poor little baby,” I said, pouting out my bottom lip in mock sympathy.

“Same here,” Nick said. “I’m trying to get ready for that big presentation on Friday.”

“And I have to assist with depositions all afternoon,” Tim added.

“That reminds me,” I asked him, “how are the law school applications coming?”

“Really well,” he said. “I got the ones to Yale and Harvard sent off, already, and I only have one more essay left for my Stanford application. After that it’s all backup schools. State, y’know, places like that. Their applications are way the hell easier than the big boys.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” I asked.

“Um, I think you did more than enough to help last night,” he said, blushing scarlet. “But thanks.”

I giggled. “Nothing like a horny blonde bitch to clear your mind and get you focused, I guess.”

“Y’know, it’s weird,” Gene commented, sipping orange juice. “All the time I’ve known you, I’ve never thought of you as ‘horny blonde.’”

“Me neither,” Nick added.

“So, you had no problem at all thinking of me as a bitch, then,” I teased.

“Oh, you have your moments,” Nick laughed. “But Gene’s right. I mean, sure – you’re hot as hell. I’ve always thought so. But ever since college, you’ve just been one of us. You did your thing and we did ours. I mean, we all got together and watched you tear through boyfriends as fast as we tore through girlfriends, talked about all the same stuff, took the same classes, liked the same things. That’s why it was such a shock when you walked in last night wanting to fuck. I swear – I’m not making this up – I think that was the first time I ever even *considered* fucking you.”

“Same here,” Tim said. “It was always such a non-issue before. Looking at you now, though – I keep wondering why the hell I never made a move on you before, in college.”

*Because I was a guy back then,* I thought, but answered outwardly with only a shrug. “That seems so weird to me,” I told them. “Because I’ve

thought about fucking all three of you before. Well, maybe not all at the same time, that was the beer talking, but you know what I mean.”

“Seriously?” Gene asked.

“Seriously,” I confirmed. “I can honestly tell you, I've wanted all three of you to nail me for as long as I've been a girl.”

“Happy to oblige,” Gene said.

“Which just begs the question none of us particularly want to ask,” Tim said in a serious tone. “What now?”

I grinned. “Oh, baby, you shouldn't worry,” I said. “I'm not in love, here. I don't want any of you fighting over me, and I have no intention of marrying any of you and having your babies, here. I like you all. I *want* you all. Nothing has changed. We're still buddies. I still want to drink beer and watch the game, just like before. I still want to go out on Gene's dad's boat and waterski and flash my tits at the other people on the lake. I want to meet up on Saturday mornings for ultimate frisbee and bloody Marys. We're still friends. Just... friends with benefits, now. I want all of that, and then one of your big hard cocks stuffed up inside me at the end of it. Is that too much for anybody to handle?”

“Works for me,” Nick said happily.

“Me, too,” Gene said.

Tim only smiled. I could tell that of them all, he might have more in mind, but would take what was offered in the meantime.

I looked at the clock in mock concern. “Guys, it's getting a little bit late. You better get ready or you'll be late for work.”

“Shit, you're right,” Nick said, bolting the last of his breakfast and washing it down with a huge gulp of coffee. “Can I use your shower, *chica?*”

“You bet,” I said. “Clean towels are in the closet behind the door.”

Nick hustled off quickly and Tim helped clear away a few dishes – *sweet boy!* – while Gene went into the living room to gather up his laptop, which he had last used to play fantasy football. I saw my chance and seized it, at war with myself over trepidation about my plan and utter *certainty* that it would work in my favor. I reached into the little basket beside the door and pulled out a silver filigreed cigarette case, found upstairs in a beaded purse. When I had first found it, I thought little of it, but when I saw it again,

I remembered it acutely – that cigarette case had belonged to Esther, given to her by a wealthy client who thought he loved her. She had given it to Emily on her eighteenth birthday. It had been the most beautiful and elegant thing Emily had ever received, and in her travels and adventures she never passed a moment where holding that case did not remind her of Esther with her infectious laugh and her sparkling green eyes, so like Emily's own. Emily always fancied, in her more poetic moments, that Esther had imbued the case with a small piece of her heart or soul for Emily to carry with her wherever she went.

I opened the case with a soft snap of the clasp and selected one of the white cigarettes inside. I placed it between my lips and perched on the arm of the sofa, casting my eyes around for a lighter or matches. Gene pre-empted me, finding a box of matches on the mantel of the fireplace and striking one for me.

“I really wish you wouldn't smoke those,” he said.

I took a deep drag, holding it deep in my lungs, saying only “I know,” before releasing a vast cloud of billowing smoke right into Gene's surprised face.



Valele Hope  
2012



No earthly cigarette could have passed the volume of smoke into my lungs that I breathed out of my mouth and nostrils into Gene's face. The tendrils of smoke crawled along his skin, leaching into his pores, softening away the hard lines and beard stubble, pushing his dark hair back away from his face to stretch into a golden blonde billowing length behind a face now ethereally pretty. Smoke crawled down his ruggedly masculine body, tracing the outlines of muscles hardened and defined by hours and hours in the gym, softening them visibly into gentle curves and swells. Large, pert breasts expanded like a blossom from his narrowing chest. Large golden earrings even appeared as if unfolding from her earlobes. Long eyelashes and kissably swollen lips regarded me with shock, but not the shock I thought I would see – not the shock of 'how could you do this to me?' but rather the shock of:

“Emily? My God, is that you?” a sweet contralto asked me.

“Esther?” I asked.

“I... I'm not sure,” she said, slender fingers exploring her face and body as if unfamiliar. “Emily, it *is* you! You look different, but I know your eyes...”

“A lot has happened,” I told her, throwing my arms around her and gathering her close to me, feeling her heart beat against my breast, a heart beating for the first time in over a century. “I'm so glad to see you. I missed you so much.”

“I missed you, too,” she said. “Emily, I... I *died*.”

“I know,” I told her. “So did I.”

“Is this heaven?”

“I think it can be,” I told her. “It has all the makings.”

“I feel strange,” she said. “Like I'm not alone.”

“You're not,” I told her. “You have someone else's body. Like I do. They're still in there. We have to share, Esther, if we want to live. It's really not so bad. He's a very kind and sweet man. His name is Gene. I've known him a long time. You can trust him.”

“Gene,” she whispered. “He is very frightened, Emily.”

“Reassure him. I remember when I came back. It was terrifying. The man I replaced – he thought he was dead and gone. Like he'd never be remembered. It took me some time to convince him that he would always be a part of me and I would never stop being grateful to him. We're a team, now. We work together. It really is quite wonderful.”

“Poor Gene,” she whispered. “I hate to think I ruined anything for him.”

I hugged her tight again. “That's my Esther,” I said. “Always thinking of others.”

“Maybe if I kept his name? Do you think that would make him feel less forgotten? Less lost?” she asked.

I passed her my cigarette and she took a deep and grateful puff. “That's what happened with me,” I told her. “I think it did help, yes.”

“I had a cousin named Gina,” she said. “I always thought that was a pretty name.”

“Gina,” I said, turning it over in my mouth. “It suits you.”

“I think it made him feel better,” Gina said.

“It will take a little time,” I told him. “But for now, all that matters is that we're together once again. I missed you so much, Esth-- *Gina*. More than I can ever tell you.”

“What happened to the others? Are there more of us?” Gina asked, playing with her blonde hair, bleached nearly white like my own.

“Not yet,” I said happily, my loneliness vanished like the billowing smoke that transformed her. “But there will be. I just have a little bit more work to do.”

\* \* \*

I held the cold silver flask against my chest, almost able to feel the script *A* engraved in the metal against my naked skin. Calpurnia – the young colored girl who worked with me, with her sweet shy smile and her beautiful voice that filled the house with songs – had found it in a box of possessions left behind at the house and thought it the most beautiful thing she had ever seen. It became her treasure, and none of the other girls could bring themselves to ask for it, even though Calpurnia never really

drank strong liquor. It sat on her bedside table for years, and the young girl would spend hours just looking at it, tracing the design of the filigree and engraving with her fingertip and smiling. For a young angel who knew only a life of discrimination and poverty, it was a treasure indeed. When the influenza took her from us in 1918, she gave it to me, her sweet voice hoarse and croaking from the terrible cough wracking her slender body. I told her I would cherish it always and think of her whenever I saw it. She smiled at that, and died a moment later.

A tiny little sip of some spirit sloshed in the bottom, probably the same alcohol that was in it at the moment of Callie's death. A hot tear stung my eye at the remembrance of her, and a sweet and joyous hope in my heart that she would live again. I knocked softly on the bathroom door and entered the steamy interior without being asked. Nick stood inside, toweling his burly body dry with a towel.

"Hey," he said, looking lustfully at the glimpses of my naked body through the steam. I had shed my filmy robe and just walked around bare-breasted, wearing only panties. "What's up?"

"Just wanted to double-check that you were okay with our, um... *arrangement*. You seemed a little bit tense about it before," I told him.

"Not tense," he said. "More like uncertain."

"Uncertain how?" I asked him.

"I've done the friends with benefits thing before, right after we graduated," he told me. "You remember Stacey Carr? We tried that shit. It doesn't last, Steph. Somebody *a/ways* falls for somebody. It never stays simple and fun. It always gets complicated."

"You think I can't handle complicated?" I asked him accusingly.

"It's not you I'm worried about. There are four of us, mama. That's a big number, especially where fucking's involved. Maybe you can keep that many balls in the air. Maybe I can. But Tim? Gene?"

"I see where you're going," I said. "You're worried about screwing up friendship with them."

"Yeah," he said. "I mean, I've known Tim since grade school. I don't want that getting all twisted up because we're both fucking the same girl, no matter how bad she wants us to."

“Well, you seem to have the best handle on this thing,” I told him. “And it's a done deal. It's on, Nick, there's no taking it back. So how about this. We make a deal, just you and me. We're the ones who get that it's just fucking. I like your cock, baby, and you like my pussy, and it doesn't go deeper than that. So we keep an eye on things. We take its pulse every now and then. And when you and me think things are going off the reservation, then, we sit everybody down and pull the plug on this.”

“You think that won't piss the other guys off?” Nick asked. “Us having something between us that they don't? They might think we're keeping secrets. Jealousy makes a brother stupid, you know that.”

“I don't think we have to tell them we have a deal,” I said. “We can spin it to look like we both came to the same conclusion independently.”

He narrowed his eyes at me as he tugged on a loose pair of blue boxers. “You are a lot more devious than you act,” he said.

“Baby, I've been living on my own as a single woman for a long time,” I told him. “I put myself through school and managed to keep myself whole and not pregnant. You can't do that unless you're devious and unless you know how to play the game. So, do we have a deal or not?”

He thought for a moment. “Yeah, that makes sense,” he said. “Deal.”

I brought out the silver flask. “Drink on it?”



He chuckled. “You are a fucking alcoholic and a half, you know that? Sure, gimme.”

He spun the top and upended the flask, taking a deep drink. Far, far deeper than the actual volume of liquid inside it seemed to merit. A barely perceptible nimbus of purplish light seemed to blossom out of his body from the inside, from his belly, and everywhere it passed it left behind smooth, unblemished flesh. The ruddy dark Latino complexion softened and became a rich *café-au-lait*, and his thick black hair took on a reddish hue as it flowed over his shoulders and down his back. His crude tribal tattoos faded away to nothing on his arms and chest, leaving behind only smooth and glowing flesh which ballooned out into a pair of marvelously large and supple breasts crowned with dark brown nipples that stiffened in the cooling air.

“Cal?” I asked as the last of the glowing energy shimmered away into the air, around her delicate little toes.

“Em?” a thickly accented voice asked back. “What's wrong with my voice? Why is my skin so light?”

“You're back,” I told her, gathering her close and pressing glad little baby kisses on her cheek and neck.

“I'm not myself,” she said.

“You are, but you aren't,” I told her. “Things have changed.”

“I'm trying to think but it comes out all funny,” she said. “I mean, I try to talk, but when I do it's all in these funny words. They make sense to me, but I know I don't know what any of them mean...”

“You're thinking in Spanish,” I said, suddenly aware of her dilemma. “Callie, you're in a different body than the one you left. This body wasn't born in Georgia like you think. This one came from El Salvador. You grew up speaking Spanish, not English. It's complicated.”

“*Madre de Díos, Emilia, ¿que pasó aquí?*” she demanded of me in her new native tongue.

“You died, Callie. A long time ago. So did I. We died, and we came back. We're not the same as we once were. We have different bodies. Different stories. I came back first – I don't know exactly how, but I did. I have the body of a young man named Steve, and I changed it somehow to make it mine. And I missed you and the other girls so much – I couldn't stand how lonely I was – so I found a body for you. It was a friend of the man I used to be, a really nice man named Nick Villacruz. You changed his body when you came back, just like I did to Steve. You couldn't change his race, and you couldn't change where he came from. It doesn't work like that.”

“I think I can feel him in here with me,” she said, lustrous brown eyes wide with terror.

“He won't hurt you, sweetheart, I promise. He's as frightened and confused as you are. That goes away, I promise. Before long, you'll be a team, working together, just like it is with me.”

“He seems very nice,” she said.

“He is. And strong, like you. You will make a very good pair.”

“So, you're Emily, but you're not really Emily any more?” she asked.

“No, I'm Emily. In my heart, I am. But I share that heart. It's not completely mine. Steve was here first, and I have no desire to evict him from it. He learned to be me. Just like Nick will learn to be you. He'll find happiness and joy and satisfaction. I know he will. Any man would be lucky to share a heart and a soul and a body with a beautiful girl like you.”

“You're still as sweet as ever,” she said, eyes softening and the first appearance of that shy, loving smile I remembered so fondly blooming on her beautiful face.

“I'm only being honest,” I said. “And I'm so happy that you're back.”

“I missed you, too,” she said. “I don't remember much. Only that it was very cold, where I was.”

“Not any more. It's warm here. It always will be. Now, get dressed. We have a lot of catching up to do, my love, and I still have just a bit more work to do.”

\* \* \*

Callie decided to follow in Gina's example and choose a name in remembrance of the man she replaced. I led the newly-minted Nicolette to a closet to choose something to wear and gave her directions to the shower and vanity so she could arrange her hair and put her face on, then grabbed the last of the items I'd found and headed downstairs to the kitchen.

There was no need to access any long-hidden memories to know who owned the little perfume atomizer of pink depression glass. The barest scent of lilac and lavender took my memories to Doris immediately – my first sexual awakening in her embrace, the constant friendship and support, and the many passionate nights spent together, easing the hurts of the men's rough practice on one another with gentle kisses and caresses. The spirit and personality that had been Emily lacked the sophistication, I thought, to realize that her relationship with Doris had been love. The more modern and worldly persona of Stephanie, however, easily recognized it for what it was. Before, I had resurrected friends. Now, I went to resurrect a lover.

I found Tim outside on the porch, thumbing through text messages on his smart phone so intently that he never noticed my approach. I touched his

wiry arm and he jumped, startled, covering his unmanly shock with an adorable blush and a nervous laugh.

“Sorry,” I told him, lighting a cigarette and leaning on the porch rail alongside him. I noticed his hungry look at my bare breasts – nipples stiff and rigid in the chilly air – and hid a smile behind a deep drag on my smoke. “Didn't mean to scare you.”

“Scares like that, I can get used to,” he told me softly.

I laughed. “You can't help it, can you?” I asked him gently. “You are absolutely fucking adorable.”

He blushed anew. “You really think so?”

“Tim, sweetie, you have to know from the scratch marks I left on your back,” I told him wryly through a cloud of smoke released from pursed lips, “that it might be possible that I kind of like you. A lot.”

“Yeah,” he chuckled, even managing to make that sound somehow self-deprecating. “You bite hard, by the way. I have a couple bruises.”

I snickered. “Sweetheart,” I told him, “I know last night was more or less a letter to Penthouse. It was a damn porno movie orgy, and I get that. It's absolutely, one-hundred-percent what I wanted, but it made me overlook something.”

“Overlook what?” Tim asked.

I took another long drag, considering. “I like all you guys. Y'know, like you in *that* way. I've always thought you were all attractive and hot and sexy. That's why I couldn't make up my mind last night, okay? Because of all the guys, Tim, baby, I felt like I needed to tell you – you're the one that has always worried me the most.”

“Worried you? Why would I worry you?” he asked, a little alarm in his mellow tenor voice.

“Because of all of them, you were the biggest risk of falling in love if I ever had sex with any of you,” I told him. “You are the *sweetest* man I have ever met. Ever. If I was going to fall for any of you knuckleheads, Tim, it would be you. I'm not even sure I'm not halfway there already. You basically knock my socks off. When I think of little girly things like marriage and babies and white picket fences, and I close my eyes and try to imagine it, then the face on the man I see is yours. It wouldn't take much for you to

have me all to yourself. I don't want that to happen right now, but I still felt like it was only fair that I let you know that.”

“Wow,” Tim said. “Are you saying what I think you're saying, Steph?”

“No,” I told him. “I'm *not* in love with you.”

I took another deep drag and let the smoke out in a rush. “But God help me, Tim, I *want* to be.”

He leaned heavily on the rail beside me and riveted me with his intense, deep green eyes. “That means a lot, I hope you know,” he said. “Because I've always been worried about saying anything to you.”

“Saying what?”

He covered my hand with his own warm one, sending little tingles all along my nubile body. “Saying that I've been crazy, sick in love with you since the first night I met you,” he said in a husky whisper, laden with emotion and just this side of audibly. “You're the most amazing person I've ever met. And the most beautiful woman.”

“You love me?” I asked, a bit incredulous.

“I didn't want to make you uncomfortable, or break up our little gang we had,” he said. “But yes. Madly. You're all I've ever wanted.”

It was my turn to blush scarlet. “You play your cards pretty close to the vest, there, Tim,” I said.

“No choice,” he told me. “Last night – shit. Last night was great. It wasn't exactly how I dreamed it would be – there were all these other people there, for one thing. But I will take you however I can get you. I know you said that it was just fucking, that it was just for fun... not for me. It was a lot more than that for me. I just wanted you to know that.”

I dragged deep on my cigarette, drawing the smoke deep into my lungs and holding it here a long while before letting it out through pursed lips to drift away on the breeze.

“If I had known, baby... it would have been different.”

“I'm not complaining,” Tim said. “I got to be with you. I got to touch you. I'm happy.”

“My God, you are so fucking sweet,” I breathed. I turned to him. “I wish I'd known.”

“Sorry,” he said. “I just did what I thought was right.”

“You know, sweetheart, there's still a way.”

“A way for what?”

“For us,” I said. “You want to be in love with me. I want to be in love with you. I see a way for that to happen. If you trust me, that is.”

“What do I have to do?” he asked, eyes sparkling.

“First, you have to kiss me,” I said, stepping towards him and slithering my arms around his bare waist. The contact of skin on skin sent shivers all over me and I leaned close, absorbing his warmth joyously. A part of me still considered it foreign to look *up* at everyone around me, but now I *liked* how much taller he was than I. How much bigger and stronger. It made me feel delicate. Protected. Cherished.

And kiss me he did. His lips lowered to my upturned ones softly, and then opened a door to flood me with a tenderness and passion and promise that I could scarcely believe. He parted from me a breathless eternity later and I almost collapsed against him, using his arms and body to hold myself up since my knees no longer seemed to be functioning properly.

He stared at me and smiled a smile that opened up his whole face. I could not help but return it.

“So, if that was step one, then what is step two?” he asked. “Because I'm okay with just staying at step one, y'know, if I didn't do it right or something.”

I laughed, high and girlish. “Oh, trust me. You did it *perfectly*,” I reassured him. “No worries there.”

“So what is this mysterious step two?” he asked.

I took a half-step back from him and raised the small atomizer in my cupped hands. He had only a brief instant to look at me quizzically before I squeezed the bulb and filled the air around us with fine mist and the overpowering scent – not just a hint of lilac and lavender this time, but the heady and all-encompassing aroma of an entire field of the fragrant blossoms, enough to scent our bodies and hair and fill our nostrils so strongly and completely that it was as much a flavor as an odor. Images of

warm sunshine and carefree play filled my mind, bees buzzing and birds singing and running through soft grass in bare feet, making love among the gnarled roots of an ancient tree, eating windfall plums and soaking feet in cold streams. I could almost feel the garland of flowers nestling in my soft hair and the soft legs of butterflies tickling my fingers as they landed.



Tim's transformation seemed to take more time than the others as I watched, almost as though the magic remaking his body wished to take its time and craft perfectly. The faded blue jeans, the only clothing Tim wore, bagged and then shimmied down a waist now far too flat to hold them aloft, over slim but shapely hips. The freckled milk-white skin melted into itself, becoming deeper and richer and glowing with health, now an unblemished alabaster. The trim, high ribcage blossomed outwards, inflating and spilling into two of the most luscious, mouthwatering breasts I had ever seen in person, topped with delectable bright pink nipples which pebbled and stiffened in the chilly breeze.

Most striking, however, was the face. The transition between ruggedly handsome and ethereally, otherworldly beautiful crept across, making no

sudden or abrupt changes but only tiny little shifts – long, thick eyelashes. Subtly higher cheekbones. A narrower, more delicate chin. Fuller lips. An upturned nose. The emerald sparkling eyes remained the same, though.

Thick, red hair – not dark auburn, but a light and striking strawberry blonde that shone gold in the sunlight – spilled over her shoulders and down her back, hanging down nearly to her waist, thick and lush and shining with health, soft as rabbit's fur and framing her delicate oval face to perfection.

The woman breathed deeply through her nose, inhaling the lush scent surrounding us, and smiled openly at me. No adjustment, no period of uncertainty or doubt or confusion like the others – the nose wrinkled above a toothy, genuine smile at the first glimpse of me, and slender arms threw themselves open wide and wrapped around me, pressing cheek to cheek with me. The melodious alto I missed so painfully for so long filled my ears with a happy sigh and a throaty laugh of pure delight.

“Emily, my *darling*,” she cooed, pressing soft kisses into my neck. “I have missed you so much.”

“You came back to me,” I said, rocking her back and forth, unable to pull her close enough to me.

“I never left, little love, never for a moment,” she said.

“The others – Calpurnia and Esther – they were confused and lost when they first woke up,” I said. “Why not you? Why aren't you as lost as they were?”

She laughed and caressed my face. “Because a part of me was always with you,” she explained. “I've seen most of this, already. Through your eyes. And I think the young gentleman I transformed had much in common with me. He's in here with me – subtly, but he's here. It's like he's telling me things. Helping guide me.”

“He was the sweetest man,” I told her.

“I can feel it,” she replied. “And he loves you. As much as I do.”

“I have so much to tell you,” I said, tears of pure joy filling my eyes. Doris – she was back in my arms, and she loved me. My heart swelled inside my chest.

“There is more than enough time,” she told me. “Let's go find the others. We need to plan, my love – Stephanie, now? I like it. It suits you.”

“Plan for what?” I asked.

“Life. I can't very well show up for a job I can't do, can I? We will need things like work. Identification. Places to live. We have a lot to discuss,” she said. “And I could certainly use something to wear.”

\* \* \*

By the time we found the other girls, Doris had chosen the name Tiffany, in honor of Timothy. I loved it – a pretty name for a pretty girl, reminiscent of diamonds and sparkling things. The closet of women's clothes had been well and truly raided by Nicolette – who had shortened her name to Nicki, for the time being – and Gina before our arrival. There were plenty of swimsuits, we discovered, and the morning had given way to a pleasantly warm day practically tailor-made for a dip in the pool I had yet to use. We stripped naked in front of one another – we had all lived together in a whorehouse, once, and had very little in the way of secrets from one another – and tied ourselves into the skimpy bathing suits once undreamed of it the day and age we lived.

Loving the feel of the day's warmth against soft and tender flesh exposed to open view, unashamedly and even approved of by the general populace, made us a little bit giddy. We chatted and gossiped and fawned over one another's beauty like we had during our first lives, reunited as old friends. It felt so good simply to be together with them – being a reborn ghost brought feelings of distinct loneliness and isolation, of being a freak, and now I was no longer alone and no longer strange. That feeling – of no longer being the *only* ghost awakened into a strange time, the only male changed by otherworldly power into a beautiful and nubile female full of unfamiliar lusts and hungers – mattered more to me at that moment than even the passion I felt for Tiffany, or the kinship I felt with Nicki, or the deep sisterhood I felt towards Gina. We laughed and joked as we walked outside into the sunlight. The girls asked me advice and information on this odd, unpredictable new world.

The sunlight dappled across our nearly naked, smooth bodies as we walked to poolside and I lectured the girls on the newfound importance of sunscreen, discovered long after our deaths. Every tidbit of information I offered quickly received confirmation from the memories they carried from the men whose bodies they inhabited, as if a bond of trust and teamwork formed between them all as we spoke.



I had never in my life – *either* of my lives, that I could recall – been so happy and so content. I remember doubting that things could get any better, but something in the back of my mind seemed to dissuade me from that belief. Like something else – something *more* – was in store for me.

But for now, I intended to simply enjoy what I had.

THE FOUR OF US FROLICKED in the pool for about twenty minutes, just joyously relishing the feel of having physical bodies once again. The part of me still unfamiliar with this, the last vestiges of male me still floating around in little pockets, yet to be dissolved and blended back into the whole, seemed almost frustrated at the pointless and unfocused nature of the morning – swim for a little bit, then bounce the ball back and forth with Tiffany or Nicki for a few moments, then to the side for a sip or two of my cocktail and a cigarette, then up onto the chaise lounge to bask in the sun, then back into the water. The male part of me wanted us to *dosomething*. Focus. Swim laps for exercise. Play volleyball for competition and keep score. Just to pick one thing and stay with it, give it some artificial purpose and become driven towards it.

I could think of nothing I would *less* rather do than focus on anything other than the companionship of my long-lost friends. It was dusky-skinned Nicki, with her exotic Latina accent, who first brought up the topic I believed we all were thinking but none of us had spoken aloud.

“Stephanie, honey – how did you know how to bring us back? Did you plan for it?” she asked.

I shrugged, making my generous breasts bounce temptingly in their tiny covering. “I didn’t plan for it. I was just thinking about you – all of you – and the idea just popped into my head. I’m not sure where it came from or anything, I was just so *certain* it would work.”

“So something out there is directing this,” Nicki added, tapping her generous lower lip in thought. “There is something else behind this, giving us little hints.”

“Maybe,” Tiffany said. “That makes sense.”

“So, then, why?” Nicki asked. “Why are we back? Why are we here?”

I looked at the bronze-skinned beauty for a long moment, lost in thought, before I answered. “I thought it was just because I missed you all so much,” I said. “Selfish. I thought it was all about me. I was the first one to come back, after all. I thought maybe it was just myself that had this strange mystical purpose, and I brought all of you back to help me. But I think Nicki is right. I think we *all* share the same purpose. We’re all here to do something, together.”

“How did the idea come to you? To bring us back?” Gina asked me, sipping her drink.

“I told you, it just popped into my head. I found things that were yours, and then I used them. I just felt that they were connected to you,” I said.

“Well, what brought *you* back?” Nicki asked.

I screwed up my face in thought. “A towel,” I said. “A pink bath towel. I didn’t even recognize it. I’m not sure if it was mine or not. I can’t imagine why I would ever own something like that.”

“That isn’t anything like me,” Gina said. “I recognized my cigarette case instantly. Before I even recognized you. I *knew* it was mine, no question.”

“Same with the flask,” Nicki said.

“And the perfume,” Tiffany added.

“But a towel? Why would I have some mystical connection to a towel? I don't understand,” I said, crossing my arms petulantly beneath my breasts. “Could it have been precious to me somehow? Meaningful, like your items were?”

“You mean you don't know?” Tiffany asked.

“My past is hazy,” I told her. “In fact, I've had to use my old diary to remind myself of who and what I used to be. As I read it, I can remember it clearly. But until I read it, it's a total blank.”

“Is it something we can help you with?” Nicki asked. “I remember some things.”

“I don't know,” I said, confused. “Some things seem important to me, but I'm not sure how. Others seem trivial, but I don't want to forget them because they make the picture of myself clearer. I don't know why I'm here. I can barely remember being in that house, floating around without a body. Not *lost*, in particular, but aimless. Waiting. I can remember the *waiting*. I think I was called back. By whom, how, I don't know. But something called me back. Something that wasn't me.”

Tiffany placed a soft, reassuring hand on my forearm and fixed me with a sympathetic and loving look. “Stephanie – *Emily*... how did you die?”

“I don't remember,” I said. “The stories I heard, from before I had a body – the stories *he* heard, I mean, that I remember now... they say I killed myself.”

“I refuse to believe that,” Tiffany said sharply. “You would *never*.”

“Did they say *how*, exactly?” Nicki pressed. “Poison? Hanging? Drowning?”

“The one story I heard said I shot myself.”

Gina shook her head, spilling blonde hair out of her loose bun made to keep her hair dry. “That's ridiculous,” she said. “You didn't own a gun. You despised them. Couldn't stand the noise or the smell. When you took the sheriff as a client, you insisted that he leave his pistol outside before you would allow him into your room.”

“She's right,” Nicki confirmed. “You never even allowed them into the house. You called them barbaric. You hated guns.”

The revulsion I felt at the thought confirmed everything the girls were saying. "You're right," I said. "I do hate firearms. I can feel it, just from your talking about it."

"So that only leaves two choices," Nicki continued. "Either you committed suicide some other way and the story is wrong – which I find very difficult to believe, you were a very Godly girl down deep and you believed suicide was an unforgivable sin..."

"...or I was shot, by someone else. I was murdered," I finished for her in a very flat, terrified voice.

"Is there somewhere we can go, dear heart, to find out more?" Gina asked. "A local library, the records office, anything like that?"

"Oh, sweetheart," I giggled, "I haven't even had a chance to show you the Internet yet."

"Can we borrow it? Should we see if we can hire someone to carry it for us?" Nicki asked.

I laughed until I could laugh no more, then tearfully explained it to them. Then we all laughed. The sudden release of tension made me lightheaded and I stumbled in the water, almost foundering, when slender and soft arms caught me up and righted me, and I found myself looking into the clear blue eyes of Gina.

"I never did thank you," she said. "For bringing me back."

"You don't have to," I told her, transfixed by her gaze.

"Of course I do," she said. "We all do. I never thought I would taste food again. Drink liquor. Smoke a cigarette or feel the sun on my face. Brush my hair. Laugh. You gave all those things back to me."

"To all of us," Nicki said.

"I want to thank you. Properly," she said. Her slender fingers slid into my hair and her long, polished nails scratched gently against my scalp, bringing me out in gooseflesh on my back and shoulders. I sighed with the pleasure of it and Gina took the opportunity to press her soft, lipstick-slick lips into my own as her arms slid around me.

Somehow, the tie of my bikini top came away and drifted down into the cool water. Behind me, I could see Nicki bestowing a similar snail-tongued, sensual kiss onto Tiffany.

Tiffany's eyes locked onto mine, saying tacitly: *Is this okay, my love? I am yours, after all.*

I gave her a coy wink. *Of course it is, darling girl. I know to whom you belong. I know who you love.*



I'm not sure how I knew, but I knew... as my tongue danced circles around sweet Gina's and her breasts interlocked between mine, hard nipples poking deliciously against soft flesh and that familiar hunger growing inside me, the three empty picture frames I had looked at early this morning, the three empty frames that had puzzled me so completely, were no longer empty. Pictures filled them. Myself, glowing and deliriously happy, wearing a white dress and carrying flowers, smiling for a camera with utter joy and delight. Behind me, Tiffany, Nicolette and Gina wore matching red dresses and carried flowers of their own, smiling along with me and showing love and affection for me – happiness for me – in every glance captured on the film. *Bridesmaids*, I thought suddenly. *They were my bridesmaids.*

I looked at my left hand and saw – as if it had always been there – a diamond solitaire engagement ring and a slender platinum wedding band gleaming and sparkling on my finger. Beautiful, expensive, and *meant* to be there. I could no longer imagine the look of my hand without them.

*I'm married*, I thought.

I broke away a little breathlessly from Gina and took her face between my hands. “Gina,” I panted, hating to interrupt her foreplay but needing the answer, “what is my name?”

“Stephanie,” she said. “Why would you ask me that? Are you all right?”

“I'm fine,” I told her. “But my name. My *full* name.”

Concern filled her eyes. “Stephanie McAllister Campbell,” she said. “You're Mrs. Stuart Campbell.”

I sighed. “Of course I am,” I said, leaning back in to kiss her. Her concern for me quickly vanished beneath a sea of passion. She threw herself into my arms, grinding her soft pussy below the water against my thigh and kneading my breasts, my *derrière* and my back with her slender, lissome fingers. I backed up a little half-step, just from the weight of her against me, and bumped into a soft posterior and a cascade of soft, fragrant hair behind me. Hair that smelled of lilac and lavender.

My hand disappeared beneath the water and found Tiffany's hand waiting. Our fingers interlaced and her love bathed me as surely as the water around my rapidly arousing body. Perhaps some would think it perverse, or freakish, or simply weird and unhealthy that I would hold the hand of the woman I loved most in the world while I allowed myself to be seduced by another. But to me – and to Tiffany, I suspected – it felt more natural than anything in the world.

I needed to feel that palpable love. I needed to be reminded of how much, how desperately and how utterly I loved Doris-now-Tiffany, enough to retrieve her soul from the afterlife and give her a body to make her own. Because I needed to be sure that I would always love her, the way I promised I would. That she would always be the most precious thing in my life. Before, it was easy to feel that way.

Before I discovered that I was Mrs. Stuart Campbell.

\* \* \*

I suppose I shouldn't have found it odd to see the big white envelope on the dining table as we came in from the pool. It hadn't been there before we went outside. I'd never seen it before. It was unadorned and completely lacking identification, but I knew I needed to see its contents as surely as I knew the cigarette case would bring Gina from her purgatory into Gene's muscular body. Inside were all the things that were missing, the things we worried about the most. A birth certificate, a social security number, a passport and a driver's license for each of us. Keys to apartments and houses and automobiles. Insurance cards and bank accounts. I passed them out wordlessly to the girls, who saw nothing out of the ordinary in them, stuffing them into purses with barely a glance other than to make rude comments about the pictures on the identification cards. They acted as if they knew all along that they were Gina Diane LaGuardia of 1342 Belmont Place, aged 24 years old and female; Nicolette Maria Teresa Vasquez Villareal of 15420 Hobart Plaza, Apartment 224, aged 23 years old and naturalized citizen of the United States from El Salvador; and Tiffany Renée Wilcox of 3221 Pond Springs Avenue, Unit B, aged 24 years old and female. They went blissfully into the other room, anxious to see this magical Internet I told them about, and set right about the serious business of buying lingerie online and downloading Katy Perry songs.

I looked at my own documents in numb disbelief, especially the marriage license and change-of-name forms marking my transition from Stephanie Elizabeth McAllister to Mrs. Stephanie McAllister Campbell, married to Stuart Adam Campbell on Saturday, the 17<sup>th</sup> of June, two years ago next month. A newlywed. A *wife*. I could scarcely believe it.

I picked up the diary and plopped unceremoniously into a chair just far enough away from the laughter and chiding in the other room to concentrate, and opened the book to where I'd left off:

*January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1913*

*Dear Diary,*

*I find myself weeping at the strangest times, after laying poor Estelle to rest. How much we all relied on her strength and wisdom, much less her canny business acumen. Now the running of this house – and the well-being of all its inhabitants – falls to me. I was not desirous of this responsibility, but all the other girls here agreed that I was best suited. I suppose I should have been touched at the faith and confidence they placed in me, but I feel only anxiety. Such a huge weight to bear. I miss Estelle hourly. Her absence in this house brings me to tears at the strangest times. I hope I will do her honor. I hope I can keep her house in good order, and make her proud of me.*

Andrew is away once again on business. Bless my soul, how he plagues me! When he is here, his strange distance and aloofness attract me and repel me in equal measures, often at the same time. I want him to the point of trembling but would gladly spit upon him for his lack of tenderness and affection. Our nights together hold such promise, but I live in constant fear of that promise never being fulfilled. If only he would say the words. If only I could be certain that he loved me, I would leave this house and cleave to him forever. But he never opens that door to me. Never lets me see inside. It frustrates me no end, Diary, and leads me to the most uncharacteristic acts to somehow prove to him my love. The last time I saw him, I baked him a cake! Imagine, me – baking a cake like some paunch-bellied matron! He barely said a word about it. I could have strangled him. I could have cried like an infant. But instead I took him to my room – the third time that day – and made love to him. That, at least, he seems genuinely grateful to receive.

A strange happening did occur today, of which I am not sure how to feel or comport myself. Martin, the young lad I hired to tend our automobile, drew me aside near the well and asked for a moment in private. When I stepped into the shade of the garage with him, the poor fool dropped to one knee, produced a small ring from his pocket and propped marriage to me, right on the spot! I confess, Diary, it rendered me most dimwitted and speechless. I fear I wounded the young boy's pride gravely by not speaking. He waited a long time for an answer and then rose from his knee and brushed the dirt from his trousers.

"I understand," he said to me. "I have nothing to offer you. Nothing to give. You are a woman of means and no small success in life, and I am a penniless young man with very little in the way of prospects. And you are too kind to say so, and instead said nothing. Thank you for allowing me my dignity, my dear beautiful Emily. You are truly an angel."

Still most insensible with shock, I think I only nodded with a slack jaw, as if afflicted. He continued as if I had agreed with his every word. "I will make you this promise, my beloved. I will go out into the world and seek my fortune. I will become successful and secure and I will return for your hand in marriage, once I am able to provide you the life to which you certainly deserve. The only condition of this I find truly heartbreaking is that I must leave your employ, and take away the joy of the sight of you every day. But if that is the price to pay for your love, then so be it. I have already selected several young men in town who have the mechanical aptitude for this job. I will send letters, my love. I will keep myself in your thoughts. And when I return, it will be as a man of means, a man you would be proud to marry. I swear it. It will not be long."

*He kissed my hand chivalrously and spun on his heel, marching through the carriage gate and down the road towards the town. He looked back and waved to me, then was lost to my sight. Martin had always been a strange and solitary boy, but this truly set the standard for oddity. I must have stood there behind that garage, stunned and unable to speak or think, for several minutes, since the others had to send Margaret, the upstairs maid, to seek me out for my morning duties.*

I was about to turn the page and read the next passage when a soft, caressing hand on my shoulder drew my attention upwards into Tiffany's smiling face and sparkling eyes.

"Are you all right, sweetheart?" she asked me.

I nodded. "Just overwhelmed. Tiffany, my love, I feel like I have betrayed you somehow," I said.

She knelt beside me and took my hand, pressing it into her cheek. "You are such a sweet fool," she told me. "Do you remember what I told you, in the dressing room before your wedding? The promise I made?"

I shook my head. "I'm sorry to say that I don't," I said. "I don't remember any more of my wedding day than that it happened."

She pressed a warm kiss into my knuckles. "I told you that we *both* wanted a lot from life," she explained. "And neither of us needed to apologize for that. You love your husband. You're devoted to him, and you know he can provide you with the things you have always wanted. I can't. Loving Stuart does not preclude loving me. If I get married, it will not preclude my loving you. You are my first love, Stephanie, and my greatest love. But I want so much more. So do you. There's nothing wrong with that, and there's nothing wrong with looking somewhere else to find it. Your husband is a busy man. He works late. He travels. We have plenty of time to be together and be lovers, Steph. I don't have to have you all to myself, every second of every day. We were whores, once, remember? I loved you then, when endless successions of strange men fucked us senseless day in and day out. I was never jealous of them, and I am not jealous of Stuart. You are still mine, no matter what you do. I have your heart, and you have mine. Whatever else happens, it doesn't change *that*."

"I love you," I told her simply. "I always have."

"And I love you," she said, smiling. "Even though you are a married woman."

I sighed. "I was having enough trouble with just 'you are a woman.' I may never get used to being a wife," I told her. "But thank you for that. Thanks for the reminder, and for promising that in the first place."

She cleared her throat and looked away from me – I thought I saw a small glistening tear in one emerald eye for one moment, but it was gone as quickly as it came. "I wanted to ask you something," she told me. "Did you notice the diploma on your wall?"

"Diploma? Where?" I asked.

She led me by the hand into the small office just off the kitchen. More photos from my wedding hung here and there, and a lovely Rothko print in a silver frame, and then a degree from State over the desk with the computer. Stephanie Elizabeth McAllister, Bachelor of Arts in Journalism.

"One of you mentioned that," I remarked. "Before you changed. I didn't think much of it at the time."

"But look at this," Stephanie said. "Did you see this?" She held up a slip of paper found beside the computer. I took it in long-nailed fingers. It was a pay stub, for a considerable amount of money, from a company called Horizon Publishing, made out to me, with all the appropriate withholding.

"Never heard of it," I said, "but it seems that I have a job there."

Tiffany moved the computer mouse with a freshly-polished nail and brought the computer screen out of energy-saving mode. A webpage for Horizon Publishing stood open on the desktop, and my picture and name were on the screen as a junior editor for a new fashion magazine, called *La Mode*.

"You have quite a job there, it turns out," Tiffany teased.

"Did this happen to anyone else?" I asked.

"To all of us," Tiffany said. "Gina got a call on her mobile phone a moment ago and discovered that she was being called from work. She runs a catering business. She catered your wedding – we all remember it perfectly."

"I wish I remembered my wedding," I grumped. "What else?"

"Nicki is an attorney," Tiffany went on. "We found a briefcase in the living room. She works in the prosecutor's office. And I, apparently, own and manage three small upscale clothing boutiques in town. I looked up my

bank account on the computer from the information you passed out to us. I am *loaded*, I'll have you know. Completely rolling in it."

"That's great," I laughed, hugging her. "Because I still remember you poor as a church mouse."

"So do I," she giggled. "Never again. I'm going right out to buy myself some diamonds. Maybe some for everybody. Or a gold bathtub. Something. I like this Rockefeller feeling."

"It's not Rockefeller any more, baby," I told her seriously. "Nobody will know who you're talking about, these days. Now it's Warren Buffett and Bill Gates."

I stood up, suddenly. "I'm going to go and get changed," I said, looking down at the dampened bikini that I still wore.

"Why? You look delicious," Tiffany said, her eyebrows quirking upwards suggestively.

"Why, thank you," I said. "But I think I might head into the office. Go see first hand whatever the hell it is I *do* for a living."

\* \* \*

It did surprise me – though it shouldn't have – that all my keys worked. One unlocked and started the silver Mercedes in the driveway, and another allowed me access to the huge glass-and-steel skyscraper downtown and another swung wide the polished oak door of the office and let me into my respectable window office, decorated with covers of the magazine I worked for. I knew it was mine – a picture of Stuart and I, skiing in Aspen, stood in a gold-edge frame on the polished desk. I sat down, tugging up the low-cut neck of my blouse a little and playing with the huge silver "dinner plate" earrings dangling from my ears as I waited for my computer to boot up. I longed to see what I worked on. What I did. Anything for some clue as to who I was outside of Mrs. Stuart Campbell.



I heard a tap at my door and a very tall, wavy-haired gentleman stepped inside, walking behind me and putting one hand on the back of my office chair. Muscular, powerfully built, with patrician good looks and polished manners, he smiled warmly at me and adjusted his very expensive tie.

A name appeared in my head. “Hi, Richard,” I said brightly. Richard Browne. Editor-in-chief.

“What on earth are you doing here?” he asked me in a smooth, melodious baritone. “I thought you were on vacation until next week.”

“I am,” I said. “I, um... forgot to synch my phone list on this computer with my phone before I left. The number for my new landscaper is on that list. I just thought I'd drop by and get it. I was in town anyway, running errands.”

He chuckled. “Running errands in a Versace blouse and Ferragamo heels,” he said. “I *knew* we hired the right person for this job. I'll leave you to it. Poke your head in my office before you go, would you? I have proofs

of that article Miranda wrote on that young designer co-op in New Mexico. I'd love to get your input before you head out."

"Sure," I told him. "Be right there."

I combed through the business computer and found very little new information on myself. Frustrated, I stared daggers at the glittering two-karat diamond on my finger as if it were withholding the information from me. "Get this straight, dammit," I hissed at the ring. "I am *not* just a wife. I'm nobody's 'better half,' nobody's 'little woman.' I raised myself up from nothing. I made something out of myself and I will *never* let anything take that away from me. You think I'm just a 'Mrs.?' Fuck you. I was never a 'Mrs.' I was a *whore*. A lewd, lascivious whore who made her living flat on her back or with a cock in her mouth. I'd rather be *just a whore* any day than be *just a 'Mrs.,'* you hear me?"

I stood up suddenly and walked down the hall into Richard's office. I entered with a soft tap and closed the door behind me, thinking *I'd rather be a whore* over and over with a caustic vehemence.

"There you are," Richard said, gesturing me over. "Come take a look at this."

I stepped behind his desk and leaned over to look at the pictures and copy emailed in from New Mexico. I barely saw them, concentrating far too hard on his reaction as I lay my soft breasts across his forearm when I leaned over.

"I like it," I told him, making him think I meant the article. "Do you?"

Even his formidable charm and smoothness hit a hiccup to my blatant sexual advance. "It's, uh... I mean..."

I giggled deep in my throat, seductively amused. "Such a silver-tongued devil," I said. "You shouldn't be so flustered, Richard – I've seen you looking at them. And they *are* nice. I thought you might like more than just a look."

He blushed, but then recovered his composure and forced himself to look in my eyes. "This isn't appropriate," he said. "We work together..."

I smiled, biting my bottom lip just a little in that way I knew drove men wild. "It's Sunday. We're the only human beings in the office. No one is here to misinterpret. Appropriate is what we say it is, and I'm saying I *like* it when

you look. I *want* you to look at my tits, Richard. I want you to touch them. I want you to suck my nipples and bury your face in my cleavage.”

I sank slowly to my knees in front of him as I spoke, capturing his utter and complete attention as I did, using all the artifice and skill gained from years as a professional prostitute to reel him in. I looked up at him adoringly, as if he were the strongest and most desirable man on the planet. I knew I had him, then, and I grinned at him impishly.



“I hope you realize, Richard – can I call you *baby*, since we're redefining appropriate here suddenly? – I hope you realize, baby, that there are parts of *you* I want to look at and touch, too.” My fingers found the buckle of his belt.

He cleared his throat and looked around anxiously. “Oh, relax,” I said, massaging his growing boner through the expensive material of his tailored slacks. “You want this. I want this. We're both grown-ups here.”

“You're married,” he protested.

*Fuck that*, I thought acidly. *I'm a whore*. "So are you," I replied. "What our spouses know won't hurt them, will it? It's not as though we all go on vacations together. You won't have to spend any time around my husband and you *certainly* don't need to worry that I'm going to tell him what we do."

I drew out his cock – a lovely specimen, thick and veiny and large enough to stretch me but not so large as to hurt me – and stroked it lovingly, bringing my face closer and closer to its blunt purple tip as I talked. The last part of the conversation didn't need to be said. It wasn't necessary. But I was determined to re-establish myself as a whore in this world. Whores didn't do what I was about to do for nothing. So I smiled at him, swolled lips just fractions of an inch above his cock, and said, "And you could be sure I would never say a word to anyone, baby – all it would really take is a corner office and knocking the 'junior' part off my business card. Think we can discuss that, maybe? Please?"

The whining, begging entreaty – and the feeling of total power over me – elated him just as my warm mouth closed over his insistent cock. I knew from his gasp and the spasm of pleasure that stiffened his entire body that the whore had emerged victorious. I would be a senior editor by the end of the week for the measly cost of one blowjob a day. And judging from how wet I was, pistoning my head up and down on his impressively-proportioned cock, slurping and moaning like a porn star, I would get plenty more than a promotion out of this. I hoped I could convince him to fuck me. I could probably get president of the company if I could get him to nail me.

I liked that kind of payment. It reminded me of how *good* a whore I actually was.

\* \* \*

The next few weeks went on like that – working on the magazine, which I enjoyed and seemed to be relatively good doing, and finding places and ways to shove Richard's cock down my eager throat during the day, then home and into bed with Tiffany wrapped around me at nights. I didn't eat much, I discovered, usually only a few little bites here and there during the day, topped off with massive amounts of Starbuck's coffee (I seemed to always have one of their paper cups in my hand) and nicotine and manic exercise in the mornings. I asked Tiffany if she thought I was anorexic. Tiffany only laughed and told me that if I had to ask, then I already knew the answer. But it fit with me. It made sense that I would have an eating disorder. I had to stay skinny, so men would want me. The moment men stopped wanting me, I would just be an ordinary woman again. So I starved myself and exercised away every calorie I consumed.

I tried to make myself read the diary but my days became busy. Workouts consumed more and more time as I accepted – and even gloried in, a little bit – my anorexia and how conscious of my figure I was. So did work and my friends. Tiffany, Nicki, Gina and I or some combination of us spent every evening together, exploring our fantastic new world and comparing notes on how best to be a modern woman in this world, having never really been women before in one way and never modern before in the other.

The concerns that plagued me – about my purpose here, and why we were brought back – seemed to fade a little behind the contentment and fun of my normal, everyday life. Until the email that *dinged* on my little mobile phone one Thursday night. Just a little friendly reminder from the Army base, that Stuart's unit was flying in from the coast on Saturday and they needed volunteers – the wives and husbands, mostly – to help set up for the homecoming party.

Stuart. My *husband*. Coming home. Home to stay. With me. His *wife*.

I nearly had a panic attack, needing two very generous glasses of bourbon and three cigarettes just to keep the world from spinning around me uncontrollably. With numb fingers, I typed out my willingness to bring some food which I was sure Tiffany's catering company would provide, and buy the balloons for the fence-line outside the airstrip. Then I went for a hot bath and a lie down.

\* \* \*

As fast as the intervening weeks had gone as I settled into my life and my job and my workplace affair with my boss and my lesbian lover, blurring one day into the next, the time between the fateful email and Saturday morning at ten o'clock seeped by at the pace of chilled molasses.

I had been working on my language and usage – using a few different websites and television shows to modernize my speech a little bit. I committed to using more profanity – once a hallmark of low station and ignorance, now accepted as the norm and women with temperate speech drew curious attention. This situation lent itself to an intensive practice of using the words *fuck* and *shit* over the next days. Any time I even thought about seeing my *husband* and being home with him, permanently, brought me out in storm of cursing out of sheer panic and frustration.

But the day came, regardless of my fears on the matter, and I dressed to seduce as I always did – out of habit and custom, more than a desire to arouse my spouse – in a little pink cable-knit sweater which left my

flattened anorexic belly bare, a little plaid parochial school skirt which barely covered me, calf-high black boots with a four-inch heel and a thick belt of wide, circular silver links. I threw my scandalously expensive Fendi purse over one shoulder, lit the latest in a very long succession of long, skinny cigarettes, touched up mascara and lipstick in the rearview mirror and drove to the little airfield outside the army base to help set up for the returning soldiers.



I stumbled, wordless and shocked, through the volunteer work, tying balloons and banners to the chain-link fence and then helping set up tables. None of it truly got in the way of my principal focus – the consumption of large quantities of vodka and the smoking of multiple cigarettes, many of them lit from the dying embers of the last one's spent butt. I worried. I fretted. The plane landed. I nearly swooned. I nearly panicked and ran away. The soldiers disembarked and they walked off the airfield, smiling and so relieved to be home. I began to sweat, a little bit. My breath only came in little shallow bursts. I lit yet another cigarette – I would need to stop by the store on my way home and buy more, so prolific

was my smoking over the last two days. I tried to keep busy. I failed. Stuart walked through the gate, directly towards me with a huge smile on his face.

No panic. No anxiety. No resentful rage at being a wife. His brown eyes locked into my sparkling green and I leapt at him, pressing a fierce and passionate kiss onto his lips and feeling a wildfire of love swell inside me at the sight of him. Nothing so intense as what I felt for Tiffany. Nothing so profound and *certain* as what I felt for Tiffany. But damned powerful. I never should have worried. I never should have lost one single second's sleep. This is the man for whom I starved myself willingly. This is the man for whom I cooked and cleaned. This was the man I loved. This was my *husband*, and I was – completely and utterly – his *wife*. His darling little wife. His better half. His little woman. His '*Mrs.*' And the thought made me so incredibly happy, I thought my feet might leave the ground.

“Hi,” I said as I broke away from him. “I missed you.”

“I missed you, too,” he said guilelessly. “You look incredible. I took pictures with me, but they didn't help. I still forgot how beautiful you are.”

I kissed him again, snuggling my upper body back and forth into his broad chest with a sexy and playful little shimmy. “Let's get you home,” I told him. “I have a *lot* of things to remind you, not just how I look.”

\* \* \*

We scarcely got through the front door of our house – *our* house, as husband and wife – before our clothes began disappearing from our bodies and we stumbled towards the master bedroom. I was walking backwards, tearing at his clothes, as he led me. Several times he had to pick me up physically to help me negotiate unseen obstacles. Every time he lifted me, that feeling of being *small* and *protected* and *cherished* flooded through me enough to make me gasp. I found myself longing for him to throw me over one shoulder like a caveman and toss me onto the bed like some prize captured from the enemy.



Naked, except for stockings, a garter and heels, I laid back underneath him on our bed – the bed we shared together – and guided him into my wet depths with not the slightest bit of resistance. No wild explosions this time – I sighed out my first orgasm within seconds of being penetrated, melting into him like my body was no longer quite solid, like I was somehow a ghost again and made from mist and willpower. He buried his face into the side of my neck and I could only wrap myself around him, hands and backs of feet exploring his divine musculature, pulling him deeper inside, wishing I could draw him bodily inside me. I could never feel close enough. He fucked me slowly – relishing every inch of every stroke – and with a contained and controlled passion which left me shaking and weak underneath him, pinned under his weight and prowess, unable to move unless he so permitted. I had been taken by his superior size and strength, and now I belonged to him. In that moment, everything I hated and rebelled against in the early 1900s, everything that drove me to become the woman I was and to fight the battles I encountered, flew out of my head. I belonged. In that moment, I was property. Like a television or a pair of shoes. He owned me, body and soul and mind. I wished I could remember

how to be angry about that, but for the life of me, I couldn't. All I could feel was his beautiful, thick cock stretching my insides, his hard muscles rippling and moving under my hands, his warm breath and stubby beard against the soft flesh of my neck, and the overwhelming and happy sense of being a *wife*.

For the first time in two lives – a *wife*.

I SAGGED AND COLLAPSED AGAINST Stuart's – my *husband's* – sweaty chest with a sigh of utter contentment and exhaustion. I kissed his chest idly, in a lovely torpor of sexual satisfaction, tracing designs in the sweat on his chest with a long, freshly manicured fingernail. I felt satisfied in a way I never had with my other male lovers – not in my rushed, naughty assignations with my boss and not in the one or two random 'hook-ups' I'd indulged with young men from the town who caught my eye, not in the wild festival of sexual abandon with my once-male friends. I felt *complete*. Whole. Like I wasn't searching for something. Perhaps Stuart didn't provide me with my answers, but I knew in my marrow that my answers were within him somewhere. I only needed to spend many more blissful hours like this, finding them among his layers and facets.

“Penny for your thoughts,” he whispered into my hair.

“I'd have to give you change,” I told him. “I'm just laying here. Being happy. Don't want to fuck that up doing anything stupid, like thinking.”

He chuckled, a deep rich sound from deep inside his thickly-muscled chest. “I thought about you every second, I hope you know that,” he told me.

“So did I,” I told him, and it wasn't dishonest. I just hadn't really known it was him, specifically, I was thinking about.

“What are your plans for this weekend?” he asked me. “I'm so out of touch. I've forgotten what civilians do in their spare time.”

“I cleared my schedule,” I told him. “For you. To spend as much time with you as possible. The girls invited me out for coffee on Sunday, but I didn't tell them yes or no.”

He stroked my back, making me wish I could purr like a cat. “You should go,” he told me. “I don't want to derail your life, baby. I want to blend into it. I want you to go out with your friends and have appointments and plans and work. I want to be a normal, everyday couple.”

“So I can't be happy to see you?” I asked, with my most adorable mock-pout.

“Not one tiny bit,” he teased.

“Can I ask you something?” I asked, rolling off of him with regret only long enough to fish a long, skinny white cigarette from my opened pack on the bedside table and light it with a disposable pink lighter and puff the smoke gratefully towards the ceiling.

“Anything,” he replied, stretching and showing off every well-defined, chiseled muscle in his torso. I felt a surge of fresh desire deep inside me but held it at bay.

“I've been wondering about this house,” I told him. “How did your father even find it? What possessed him to buy an old bordello and remodel it like this? Don't get me wrong – I love this house. I just can't figure out how in the world you came by it.”

He breathed out a long sigh of contentment and half-rolled in the sweat-soaked sheets to face me. I propped my face on my hand and sucked languorously on my cigarette as I listened. “I was born and raised here, you know,” he said in a faraway voice. “On Ragdale Road. Just down at the bottom of the hill. This house is really easy to see from there. I grew up looking at it. Once Dad started to find a little bit of success in his business, he started looking around for investment properties. I think he always admired this old house. He told me once that his grandfather loved this house, back at the turn of the last century. We joked about it – I think it was still a brothel back then – but it wasn't the sex. It was the house, to hear Dad tell it. He loved the house.”

“How did he know about it?” I asked.

“I think he worked here, for a little while. Just before World War I. I think I remember Dad saying he was a handyman or a mechanic or something.”

I stifled a gasp. “What was your great-grandfather's name?” I asked.

“Martin Campbell,” he said without hesitation. The boy who loved me when I was Emily, and promised to come back to me once he'd made his fortune. “My dad was named after him.”

“Whatever happened to Martin?”

“I'm not really sure. It was my Uncle Roy who did all the genealogy stuff, I never paid much attention,” Stuart said, eyes distant in recollection. “I think

I remember hearing that he left town just before the war to try and find work. He bopped around from job to job for a while, then enlisted when the First World War broke out. He served overseas and rumor has it he married my great-grandmother at gunpoint after getting her pregnant. She came back to the States with him from France and he pretty much left her here while he traveled around looking for work.”

“Did he ever find anything?”

“Not that I remember. He died of pneumonia while he was looking for either gold or silver in Canada. It was my grandfather – his son – who had the real talent. He wound up being one of the very first financiers in the country to predict the economic recovery after World War II. Invested heavily overseas during all that goodwill after the war before Communism shut down ties with the West. He made a small fortune importing from China and Malaysia to the U.S. and finally ended his career teaching economics and finance at State. Won a whole bunch of awards for teaching, too. Smart guy.”

“Wow,” I remarked, puffing my cigarette thoughtfully. “So then what? Tell me how your dad made his bones. How did your family get so successful?”

He got suddenly self-conscious. “It wasn't so much Dad. Dad had the money that Grandpa left him, and he invested it pretty conservatively. But he probably would've stayed that way, investing conservatively and never really hitting the big time, if not for... well, me.”

“You?” I asked. “What did you do?”

\* \* \*

“He convinced his dad to take some of the money he had sunk into oil companies and put it into natural gas, solar, wind – renewable energy,” I told the girls gathered around the table at the *chic* little eatery we chose for our weekly coffee. “Back during the nineties, when oil was king, before Desert Storm and Saddam torching the oil fields and all of that shit. By the time Obama took office, Stuart said, those investments quadrupled in value. They went from pretty well off to stinking fucking rich in a matter of months.”

“That's unbelievable,” Nicki said. “And Stuart predicted that?”

“When he was sixteen,” I said proudly. “I never really knew, but he's kind of a *protégé* in economics. He has a knack for it. He just somehow saw it coming, ten years before it actually happened.”

“That is incredible,” Gina commented.

“But don't you see what this means?” I asked. “Martin Campbell – that silly boy who was the mechanic for us, back in 1912... *that* is Stuart's great-grandfather,” I said. “The one who promised that he would return and make me his wife once he had gone out into the world and make his fortune.”



Tiffany's eyes were the first to widen. “He never amounted to much,” she breathed. “So the promise passed itself on to the next generation, then the next – then the Campbell boy who *did* finally make his fortune, Stuart, returned to the house...”

“...and made me his wife,” I said. “He kept the promise his great-grandfather made.”

Nicki clicked her tongue. “That doesn't explain why a towel you don't remember owning is the thing that transformed you,” she said. “There's got to be more.”

I took a tiny bite of the ridiculously decadent chocolate cake I shared with Tiffany. My mind idly pictured it, turning into a lumpy and disgusting glob of greasy fat and implanting itself in my hips and ass, and I knew I would be in the bathroom soon, stuffing my finger down my throat to keep that horrible transformation from ever happening. But for now, I just allowed myself to enjoy the taste, counting on my imported Kona coffee and cigarettes to keep any appetite that might lead me to eat more at bay. I felt like I owed it to Stuart as much as I owed it to myself. He delighted in my body. He eyed it with pride and lust and all the things I wanted him to feel. I would keep it the way it was if I never ate another bite of food for as long as I lived.

Tiffany's foot, clad in scandalously expensive Jimmy Choo platform pumps, continued to caress the inside of my calf and thigh underneath the table, our stockings rubbing together with a faint *whisking* sound just enough to be audible but not so loud as to be noticeable. I traded a secret smile with her, and she favored me with a coquettish wink.

“Have you finished the diary yet?” Gina asked.

I blushed and covered my mouth. “No,” I said. “I've been preoccupied.”

They all giggled, knowing that meant I had spent every waking hour gaining more carnal knowledge of my husband and not reading. I took another infinitesimally small bite of cake and laughed along with them. I had no secrets and certainly no shame before these women. They knew me.

“Well, hopefully you can tear yourself away from Stuart's cock long enough to try and hunt down some answers,” Gina said. “I guess that answers my other question, too.”

“How is the sex?” I finished for her. “Amazing. Some of the best I've ever had, in either lifetime.”

“I'm really happy for you,” Nicki told me. Tiffany nodded silent agreement and approval. I felt relieved – a part of me secretly *needed* Tiffany's permission to enjoy fucking my husband.

“Tell me something – have you tried taking the plunge yet?” Tiffany asked, one eyebrow quirked up in that special way she had, the way that told me she was about to say something scandalous.

“What plunge?” I asked.

“Going bareback,” she said. “Letting him fuck you without a condom.”

I gasped a little. “He hasn't even asked,” I said.

“And he won't,” Nicki supplied. “It's the way of things in this day and age. It's our choice now, not the man's. I wish it had been this way in 1912. All those miscarriages. All that syphilis and chlamydia. None of it had to happen.”

“Best not to think about that,” Gina said, patting Nicki's hand. “We live here, now. And things are different. For the better, I think.”

“Hear, hear,” Tiffany said. “But having sex without protection these days – it's a sign of trust and serious commitment. A mark of real love between a man and a woman.”

“It still frightens me,” I confessed.

“Of course it does,” Tiffany retorted. “That's what makes it so sexy. The thought of having a great big cock stuffed into my asshole frightened me too, until I tried it. Now it's a favorite hobby.”

We all laughed. I thought, for a moment, that Tiffany seemed to be pressing me on the subject, and I resolved to ask her about it later, in private. Did she have some hidden reason, something she didn't want to say aloud in front of our friends, for wanting me to do this? All she needed to do was tell me so, and I would do it gladly.

Her look was inscrutable and unreadable. She just gave me that suggestive eyebrow, perched on her flawlessly beautiful face over a strange half-smile. So mysterious, my love was. It turned me on.

I put down my fork and stood. “Excuse me a minute,” I told them.

“You don't have to puke it up right away, you know,” Nicki teased knowingly. “You can wait a few more minutes.”

I screwed my face in a playful *moué* but continued on my way. I could feel it, inside my stomach, churning and changing and making me fatter and more grotesque by the second. For all the enjoyment I'd felt tasting it, now I couldn't stand the thought of having it inside my body for another second. The other girls watched me go sympathetically, perhaps even with some pity, but they didn't judge me. That's what made them friends.

\* \* \*

I lounged in the bathtub, a cigarette smoldering between my fingers and a lovely chilled mimosa in a fluted glass at my elbow, reading my old diary –

how strange that I considered it *mine*, now, and not the words of some other woman which somehow implanted themselves in my memory. But the drink and the cigarette were altogether forgotten right now. The house could have exploded and I doubt I would have noticed, so rapt I was in the elegantly scripted words on the faded page.

December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1913

Dear Diary,

*My worst fears – or are they my fondest hopes? – are realized at last, dear Diary. My visit this morning to Mother Aldridge confirmed it. I had hoped it was only a stomach flu or a case of sleeplessness and biliousness. But she examined me, and I am with child.*

*I wrote, you remember, a month ago that Andrew had passed through town on his way north and visited me late during the night. What I did not write – because it did not occur to me as significant at the time – in that entry is that I broke one of my very oldest rules when he came to me. I have told you, Diary, how desperate he makes me. How he drives me to extremes in some mad quest to prove my love to him. This time, I let him come to me without using one of the pessaries I had always used to prevent pregnancy. I wildly thought that setting aside my one and only way of protecting myself in my profession would somehow prove to this infuriating man once and for all the depth of my affection towards him. That this act, as opposed to all the other mad schemes of the past, would be the one which would open his eyes and make him realize I was the only woman for him.*

*I know it must be smaller than a pea, but I know I can feel his son growing inside of me, forming and lengthening and becoming alive and wonderful. I have written to Andrew but did not tell him the news by correspondence. I do not wish any part of this wonderful and terrifying news to be given improperly. I have asked him to visit me on his return in three days and I will tell him the news face-to-face. My fondest wish, Diary, is that this event is the one he has waited for, that this will be the match which will strike the fuse of his commitment to me. Of his love and fondness for me, I have no doubt. Perhaps now that I carry his child, he will view me as a woman, and a mother, or even a wife if God wishes it, and not simply a whore.*

A child. A child by Andrew Holt. It still made no sense. How did I die? I don't remember any children. I remember being adamant about birth control, such as it was in the early twentieth century, writing letters to Margaret Sanger thanking her for her courage. I remember the little silver case where I kept my rubber diaphragm and the sharp camphor smell of

the contraceptive pessaries I inserted into myself before every client. The vinegar douches after every tryst. I remember as a madam, instructing all the girls in my house how to properly protect themselves. But not a child. Not even the mention of a pregnancy sparked such memories. I died childless. I know I did.

And I know I died less than a month after that entry. The remainder of the diary was noncommittal, mundane things – new girls hiring on, old girls leaving, getting the settee re-upholstered and what color this girl or that girl ought to dye her hair. A particular cloche hat seen in a shop window in town and how fetching it would look. A new seamstress on Broad Street who made the most divine handbags.

And then, nothing. Blank pages. Like the rest of my memory.

I stood and dried myself, using the pink “Hers” towel that had started it all, and padded on bare feet along the hardwood to the bedroom. I heard a creaking step behind me and saw my Stuart, wrapped in a towel of his own, fresh from his shower upstairs. He leaned against a doorjamb, a bemused smile on his face.

“What are you smiling about?” I asked.

“I hate to see you go,” he joked. “But God, how I love to watch you walk away.”

I blew him a sultry kiss. “Come in here,” I told him. “I want you to do more than just watch.”



I lay back beneath him, luxuriating in his kisses along my neck and collarbones, my nipples stiffening deliciously against his firm chest as my own ardor rose to feverish levels. His hands kneaded the firm muscle of my thighs and he pressed himself against me, his blunt-headed member sending dizzying jolts of pleasure through my body as he ground himself against my swollen clitoris. I reached beside myself, to the bedside, pawing blindly around my cigarettes, my lighter, a bra discarded and forgotten from last night's romp, until I located by touch the large box of condoms in their shiny foil wrappers.

I looked at the little package, chewing my bottom lip in consternation, considering. Tiffany's words in the coffee shop warred with the phrases from my diary. Trust. Love. Conception. Wildness. Risk.

His kisses became more insistent. I did not have much longer to decide. He would be inside me in minutes – we both wanted it. It was up to me to decide if it would be protected by a thin wall of latex or flesh against flesh, nothing between us, *truly* together for the first time.

I dropped the condom back on the bedside, wrapped him in my arms and kissed him hungrily. He used a hand to guide himself into me. It felt so different to me. Better. More intense. The absence of the condom changed the entire way I felt: physically *and* emotionally. I don't think Stuart noticed at all.

\* \* \*

Stuart rubbed my neck, making me moan in delight, as he walked up behind me while I cut vegetables for a salad for dinner. I found it ironic for as much as I seemed to loathe food and eating, I adored the feeling of cooking for my man. It made me feel both wonderful and a little ashamed at the same time, like I were some kind of delightful, charming cliché.

I thought I was maintaining myself quite well, hiding the majority of the unrest I felt inside my heart from him and giving the outward appearance of a happy, contented wife. But something only Stuart could see must have given me away, because he kissed my cheek and asked, "What's with you? You've been mopey all afternoon."

I sighed. "It's silly."

"Try me."

"I found an old diary while you were deployed. One of the prostitutes who used to live here. It was really interesting and I got really into it," I said. "I just finished reading the last entry and I don't know what happens next. It made me really sad. I felt like I really knew this girl – I started thinking of her as a friend. Now that it's finished... I miss her. See? Told you it was silly."

He clicked his tongue. "That's not silly at all. It's really sweet. Well, baby, I don't know about any diary, but there's a whole box of old stuff from the woman who used to run this place around World War I. Ledgers, receipts, letters, all kinds of shit. I put in the little closet in the study, you know the one I'm talking about?"

I almost ran out of the room right then, but I stopped myself. "I should at least finish making dinner," I told him. "Or see if you want to nail me 'til my legs shake right here on this countertop."

"You should already know the answer to that last part," he said, kissing me and cupping my ass in his strong hands long enough to give me a squeeze that made me yelp with shocked pleasure. "But I can make a salad, for Chrissakes. Go see what's in there. I can tackle dinner until you get back."

I raised up on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek, bouncing off like an excited schoolgirl with a singsong “thank you” trailing behind me. I rushed into the study and opened the little closet, stuffed with file boxes and other odds and ends. I found the box he mentioned near the bottom of the stack and opened it with something approaching avarice.

Most of it was useless – household accounts and ledger entries in both Emily's elegant handwriting and a more unrefined, blocky script that I could only assume had been Estelle's. I began leafing through receipts, dropping the uninteresting ones to the floor as I searched through them at high speed. I began to think the box might be a crashing disappointment when I found the group of receipts folded into the pages of a letter, written on creamy stationery in Emily's hand.

The receipts were for purchases I would not have expected from a bordello. A silver shaving cup, brush and razor from Morton's Men's Outfitters. A double bed. A boot-jack and a hatrack. And most telling – a man's bathrobe and two sets of towels, one embroidered “His” and the other “Hers.”

I opened the letter which enfolded all those purchases and read it quickly.

*Mary Katherine,*

*I know this must sound hysterical to you, but I entreat you to trust me. This is very important and must be handled with total discretion and without a word to anyone else. I am counting on you, my dear.*

*I have a very important client coming – one who could significantly alter the future of our house, should things transpire to my plan – in two days, and I need to re-decorate my boudoir to give the illusion that we are a married couple. For this I shall need such things as a man's toiletries, some fresh linens more suited to a masculine taste, and a double-width bed and all the bedclothes that go with it. The more at ease and comfortable this man feels in my bedchamber, the better the outcome for us all – I need him to believe that he has come home to his wife, to feel it in his bones.*

*Please, I cannot impress upon you enough the importance of discretion in this. I have placed twenty dollars gold in your room, under your copy of Plato's Republic at your bedside. If more is required, please ask me for it in person and you shall be remunerated.*

*Thank you, my dear, in advance. It benefits us all that this venture go correctly.*

*Love always,*

*Emily.*

So the towel was Emily's. Bought and placed in her very own room to give Andrew Holt some short snapshot view of life with Emily as his wife. That seemed meaningful enough, but something was missing. And was she a suicide? Was she murdered? Some horrible accident? I had to know. I needed to get away from the house and its sensory reminders of Emily and days gone by. I needed to regain perspective and think about this thing from a different venue. I trotted into the kitchen and finished the meal I began, then sat and smoked cigarettes, sipping coffee, while he ate. I cleared away the dishes and set a land speed record for rinsing them off and putting them into the dishwasher. Then off to the bedroom to change clothes, a quick peck on the cheek of my husband and I was out the front door like being shot from a cannon. I piled into my luxury sedan – bought with Stuart's money but still mine – and drove the short mile-and-a-half to Roberto's, the *chic* little dance club and bar where I spent many happy evenings, being admired, sometimes even stalked, by the clientele and patronage. It was a great place to pick up a drink, have a smoke, listen to great music and dance until there was no dance left inside me.

It was early – not the time I usually found myself at Roberto's – but a very well-dressed and sexy crowd of partygoers already filled the place. I made my way to the bar quickly, wanting a nice stiff drink to steady my nerves, perhaps even something sweaty and meaningless with a total stranger in the alley behind the building to thoroughly distract myself. Many potential candidates wandered here and there through my field of vision, looking at me covetously in my casual outfit of faded jeans, tube top and suspenders. I could not help but dress myself in a way to bare my belly these days – flat and well-muscles as always, but now glittering with a little rhinestone butterfly from a new piercing above my navel, relic of a wild night of drinking with Tiffany and Nicki and wandering past a piercing and tattoo parlor on our way home. I ordered a cosmopolitan from the sweet-faced bartender and leaned against the bar, lighting a cigarette as I surveyed the crowd and took a long draw from my drink.

I had expected my normal reaction to tobacco and alcohol – a strange sense of “settling in” to the serious business of self-abuse, a calm adjustment in my body and mind to the next few moments of self-abuse – and relaxed myself, waiting for the feeling of well-being I was accustomed to to overtake me. It never came – in its place, a wave of nausea overtook me after my first drink and lungful of smoke. Alarmed, I ran as fast as my designer platform wedge shoes would let me to the women's room, drink and cigarette forgotten, and barely managed to drop to my knees in a stall

before retching. My usual state of starvation led me to bring up only water and coffee, but it alarmed me nonetheless. I didn't get sick. From memories of two lifetimes, I remembered never getting sick.



A soft tap on the stall door snapped me from my miserable musings. A soft woman's voice asked, "Are you okay in there?"

I wiped my lips and chin with a piece of toilet paper. "I think so," I told the voice. "Thanks."

I came out of the stall and rinsed my mouth with water from the tap, still surprised at my reaction to substances I enjoyed on nearly a daily basis. I briefly considered using my little mobile phone – so unused to having technology which would allow me to contact anyone in the world and fit in my pocket – to call a doctor or one of my friends, but the nausea soon passed and I felt quite myself once again. Not enough to go back out to the bar and finish my drink or my cigarette – the thought of drinking or smoking made me queasy all over again – but well enough to find my car and make my way back to my house.

\* \* \*

If only that had been the end of it, I probably could have kept myself from worry. But it happened several more times, increasing in both frequency and intensity. For the next few days, even certain smells were enough to send me rushing for the bathroom, and my body positively shook with need and want, so long it had been since I had indulged my addiction for a drink, or a cup of coffee, or a cigarette.

I tried to live my life as normal, with my sparse-to-nonexistent meals and my active social life and my nights filled with wild, passionate sex with my husband, my lover or whatever stranger captured my eye for the moment, but these new and strange events – crippling nausea at unpredictable and inopportune moments, ravenous hunger for the oddest things at the oddest times, sleeplessness, a transient irritability which destroyed my customary sunny disposition at times, finding myself snapping and growling at my sweet husband or my beloved friends over the most inconsequential things.

The symptoms all led to the same conclusion. It was so obvious, but I didn't want to admit it. It finally drew to a head about four nights after I first experienced the nausea. I had set the stage for a lovely night of lovemaking with darling Stuart – flower petals and candles surrounding the bed, a stunning royal blue satin nightgown and filmy panties bought specifically for the occasion at a local lingerie shop, and enormously tall clear plastic platform heels which did marvelous things to my legs and derrière and that I new for a *fact* drove Stuart wild to see. Chocolates and champagne and soft, sensual music; about two hours' worth of preparation time, not including the hour and a half it took me to wax my bikini line, apply my makeup and arrange my hair. When I heard Stuart's key in the lock downstairs, waiting sexily on the bed and anticipating that first, hungry look in his eyes at the sight of his centerfold wife waiting for him to pounce on her glorious body, no thrill passed through me. Not the slightest twinge of desire, no hint of the yawning emptiness in my middle that drove me to the depths of depravity in that way Stuart loved in me so completely.

Just... nothing. No spark of sexuality or desire. No stirring or wetness in my loins. Just a fervent wish to crawl under the covers, pull them up to my neck and sleep for days, preferably in a heavy flannel nightgown that covered every inch of my body, hiding it from view and any desire.

I didn't want to feel like that. I *hated* feeling like that. I was a sexual being – sensual, aggressive, desirous and insatiable – and it was the only way I'd ever felt in my life. It was the only thing I knew. It was the only thing I *wanted* to know. Not feeling that constant, baseline desire felt like a part

of me had been cut away or stolen. Like adjusting to life without my dearest and closest friend.

I knew what I would find. I dreaded it, and I longed for it. Nothing would make me happier, nothing filled me with revulsion and fear so utterly. I slunk out of bed and into the adjoining bathroom like a woman being led to the gallows, dropped my filmy see-through panties around my knees and sat on the toilet, waiting for the flow to drop from inside me. As I waited, I took the little box I had purchased from the drugstore that morning, with fear and trepidation in equal measure with trembling hope, selected one of the wands from inside and unwrapped it, scanning the directions for the home pregnancy test. I held the wand beneath the heavy flow of urine that spilled out of me for five seconds, trying to ignore the little warm droplets coating my hand, then held the wand up to the light and began the excruciating wait for the little “plus” or “minus” sign to appear in the little window.



Stuart entered the room seconds after the sign appeared. He tapped on the door to the bathroom – I had left it open in my hurry – and offered me a smile.

“Hi, beautiful,” he said warmly. He gestured casually to the room behind him, arranged for sex. “Looks like you had tonight all planned out. You look amazing, by the way.”

I burst into uncontrollable tears and rushed into his arms, burying my face against his chest and sobbing. He stroked my hair softly and whispered nonsense to me, rocking me gently back and forth in the strong, muscular fortress of his embrace. As soon as my tears were once again mine to control, I looked up at him through a mask of ruined makeup and running nose.

“What is it, my love?” he said softly. “Why so upset?”

I held up the little wand of the pregnancy test to him, revealing the little “plus” sign in the window above my fingertip. “Not upset,” I told him. “I’m happy... *dad.*”

\* \* \*

Stuart's ensuing insanity over the next week brought my unrest to a quick close, replacing feelings of dread and uncertainty with unbridled excitement and happiness. I walked behind him through store after store, my hands subconsciously pressed against the little life growing inside me, trying to feel it take shape. Stuart bought everything he thought a baby might need – by his frantic logic, that list included things like hand tools and modular DVD storage and a magazine subscription – and I spent the day laughing in pure delight. It was while we were patronizing a lovely little stationery store, looking for the paper to print the birth announcements, that I saw a little rack by the register containing blank, leatherbound diaries. One, with maroon leather and gold accents, looked exactly like the diary I had kept in my former lifetime, and I took it instantly, paying for it with cash from my designer purse.

Stuart walked behind me and kissed me tenderly on the neck, massaging my shoulders. “I know you're not showing, yet, but did you want to go look at maternity clothes?” he asked.

“Oh, God, not yet,” I said. “I'm not ready to think about getting huge and fat and disgusting just yet.”

“You could never be disgusting, not if you weighed three hundred pounds,” he assured me softly. “You’re the most beautiful woman in the world, Stephanie. You grow more beautiful every day. You’re going to be the mother of our child.”

*Mother.* The word still shocked me, terrified me, but a boundless curiosity followed right after – once the shock of *I am a mother* wore off I got to feel *I wonder what kind of mother I will be?* But his tenderness and the very palpable flood of his love for me soothed away any distress.

“But do you? Want to look for something for you?” he reiterated gently.

“Not today, honey,” I told him. “I’m actually feeling a little bit tired.”

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll finish up here and we can head home. Maybe grab something on the way home? Pickles and ice cream?”

“Ugh,” I said, pulling a disgusted face and sticking out my tongue.

He shook a mocking finger in my face. “You don’t eat enough,” he said. “You have to pick something. Your usual diet of vodka, coffee and Virginia Slims doesn’t apply any more.”

“Okay, okay. I surrender,” I told him. “Maybe... I dunno... Thai? Pad see ew sounds promising.”

“You got it, babe,” he told me.

“I’m going to go and sit down,” I told him. “My feet are killing me.”

He shook his head. “Maybe you should consider something more comfortable than four-inch heels.”

I raised *my* finger in mock sternness. “I will compromise about the eating. I will compromise on buying a screwdriver set for our unborn baby. I will even compromise on naming the child. But you will *not* change my mind about shoes. I intend to be in six-inch platforms with my legs in the stirrups when I push this kid out, you understand? And I expect you to keep that cute, sexy mouth *shut*.”

He chuckled. “Yes, ma’am,” he said. “If I live to be a thousand, I will *never* understand you.”

I found a little bench outside the store and sank onto it gratefully, massaging my calves. I longed – neither for the first nor the last time – to light a cigarette and enjoy it in the dappled shade, but instead dug my new

diary from my purse and opened it to the first page, running my fingers over the creamy vellum paper bound inside. I took a silver fountain pen – a gift from Tiffany for my first anniversary, I remembered, engraved with my name – in my hand and set it to the paper.

March 4<sup>th</sup>, 2013

*Dear Diary,*

*Although the handwriting is different, and probably the language I will use, this entry is long overdue. Nearly a hundred years overdue, in fact. But my spirit has lived on, reborn in this new body, and I have every reason to believe it might live on again, so I feel obligated to set my thoughts on paper in case some other frightened, confused soul needs my guidance.*

*The gap remains between my last days as Emily and my first days as Stephanie. I do not remember how I got here or why I have been reborn. I have no idea what my purpose is or why the natural order of life and death was suspended in my case. I only anecdotally know how I died, back in 1914. There is still no memory. I feel that it is the key to everything – why I am here, why I never crossed over into whatever afterlife awaited me, and what I was brought back from death to do. I wish I remembered.*

Something stirred my memory. A nagging insistence in my brain, something I was quite incapable of ignoring. Heeding the urge, I dug in my purse past my wallet, a few extra tampons I had never gotten round to removing, as well as my pack of cigarettes that I simply didn't feel right not having, even though the smell of them made me retch. Sunglasses and car keys. My fingers closed on something small and cold. I withdrew it and held it in front of my eyes. A silver locket, engraved with a letter *E* worn down with age and use. Recognition dawned. The locket, given to me my first year at the house by my friends. The very first birthday present I ever received. Wordlessly, solemnly, I lifted my hair with my wrists and fastened it around my neck to dangle into my cleavage.

My vision blurred and shifted, making me gasp and stiffen. Suddenly, without warning, I was simply... *elsewhere*. A young woman – a woman I recognized from a picture on a wall and the same eyes I saw in the mirror – walked nervously in a room decorated as the bedchamber of a married couple. No detail overlooked, not even the embroidered “His” and “Hers” towels beside the washstand. A tall, classically handsome man in a pinstriped suit and fedora stood in the doorway.

“I thought you would like it,” she said plaintively. “I thought it would make you feel at home.”

“But this isn't my home,” the man said. “I never pretended otherwise. You know that.”

“But it *could* be,” she said desperately. “I could *make* it a home for you. I love you, Andrew!”

“That isn't the point,” he grunted.

“Then make it the point,” she hissed. “Say it. I want to hear you say that you love me.”

“Why is that so blasted important to you?” he challenged.

“Why *isn't* it important to you?” she retorted hotly. “For years, I have loved you. Dreamed of you. Been willing to give up everything I have ever known, everything I have worked for and sacrificed for, just to be with you. Now I just want to know if you are willing to do the same. Just one word, one tiny little indication that you feel anything similar for me.”

“You place an inordinate amount of value on feelings,” he accused. “They don't matter.”

“They are the *only* things that matter here, can't you see?” she wailed. “I have to know how you feel! I have to know if you love me! Right now, Andrew! There is *nothing* more important?”

“Tell me why!” he barked. “Why now? Why the rush?”

“Because *I am carrying your child!*” she cried.

“Oh,” he said quietly. “I see.”

“Can't you understand, now?” she went on, more calmly. “We have the chance to be a family together. To make a life together. We can be married.”

He laughed, a harsh sound. “Married? Have you lost your sense, woman? We can't be *married*.”

“We can if you love me,” she said quietly.

“We can't,” he reaffirmed harshly, voice as flat as a planed board. “Get it through your head. You are a *whore*. I can't be seen to marry a common whore. What would people say? What would happen to my business?”

“People would only know if we told them,” she protested.

“You silly bitch,” he scoffed. “I couldn't marry you. I'm *already married*.”

“Already...”

“It was you that made all of this nonsense up,” he said, pacing into the room slowly. “It was you that got it in her silly head that this could be respectable. That this could be *love*. And then you just took leave of your senses and let yourself get pregnant. Like some whore's whelp should matter a damn to me. I have kids of my own – legitimate kids, born in wedlock to a *decent* woman. You won't extort money from me to raise your own little bastard. As if I could be sure it was even mine. You fuck enough men, day in and day out – it could be anyone's.”

“It's yours,” she said through the fragile shimmer of her broken heart.

“So, is it blackmail? You want money or something?” he growled.

“I don't want money,” she said softly. “I just want *you*.”

“I'm spoken for,” he said. He ran one hand across the towels on the washstand, pulling the “Hers” towel up and toying with it menacingly. “And I can't have you, out there with your little bastard, threatening my livelihood or my family. You were a fun distraction, woman, but you are no longer worth the trouble you've become. I have a reputation to uphold. I'm a *businessman*, for Chrissakes. I can't just let this go.”

“Andrew, what are you talking about?” she asked, a touch of fear creeping into her voice. “Just leave. You'll never hear my name again. I don't *want* you to – I don't ever want to see you again. Just go.”

“Oh, I will,” he said, reaching underneath his suitcoat. “Once I've taken care of a few things.” He withdrew a dark revolver from his waistband and wrapped it menacingly in the “Hers” towel.

“I thought you loved me,” she said, weeping silently but still proud and defiant. “Your baby.”

“No one would love you,” he said flatly. “No one could truly love a whore.”

He raised the gun and fired. There was a split second of white hot pain in my temples, causing me to bite back a scream of tortured shock, and then I was in the real world again, on a little bench outside a stationery store, gasping and lost, unstuck in time, with one thought and one thought only echoing in my mind like a mantra: *The baby. The baby must live. It doesn't matter if I die. The baby has to live.*

I knew why I was here.

\* \* \*

EPILOGUE: Seven months later



“My God, girl, you look so gorgeous,” Tiffany said, squeezing my arm fondly. We had difficulty embracing, since our distended pregnant bellies kept us nearly a foot apart.

“That’s ridiculous,” I scoffed. “I am huge and fat and completely repulsive.”

“But your tits have become *enormous*,” Nicki said.

It had only been a few weeks after I discovered I was pregnant that Gina announced she was a few weeks along, and the a week later both Nicki and Tiffany announced the same. None of the other girls had the luxury of knowing the fathers – their own active, anonymous sex lives and their sudden wild urge to fuck without contraception the way I had led quickly to

pregnancy. We suspected some otherworldly involvement – none of us had ever been anything less than careful about birth control for two lifetimes, and suddenly we all got it in our heads at the same time to stop using condoms and wound up knocked up shortly thereafter.

“Oh! God! She's kicking,” I said, and Nicki pressed her hand to my belly to feel it. We all broke out in beaming, self-satisfied and knowing smiles, sharing in that intimate and utterly feminine feeling, that little life squirming and moving inside bodies that, up until recently, had belonged to us alone.

“Are you eating enough?” Gina asked me pointedly.

“Have *you* stopped smoking?” I shot back.

“Yes,” she said proudly. “It's been two months. Don't dodge the question.”

“I am eating,” I told them. “I hate it – I'm so disgusting right now, but I'm doing it. For little Emily.”

I had found out I carried a girl just a week ago, at my seven-month ultrasound. Stuart had been a little disappointed that he would not have a son, but it soon passed. Especially when I reminded him that we could, legally, have more than one child in this country. At least it wasn't twins, like Nicki. I would at least have the luxury of having one at a time.

“I just can't wait to get back to normal,” I breathed. “To get off all this nasty fat all over my body – I wonder if I can *ever* get my ass back to normal – and have a fucking cigarette. I'm *dying* for one.”

“God, I *know*,” Gina seconded. “And a martini. I miss martinis.”

“Still, this is pretty wonderful,” Tiffany commented. “I'm really enjoying it. Being pregnant – I can't describe it. I could stay this way forever. I'm afraid that once little Kayleigh gets here, the first thing I'm going to do is go right back out there and get pregnant again.”

“Maybe, find a husband first,” Nicki laughed. “Might be nice to have the help.”

“Imagine, me... a baby factory,” Tiffany snorted.

“Don't fight it,” I told her. “I think it's meant to be.”