



SUMMARY: Being part of a ring of identity thieves, one of the gang starts to notice changes about himself and his friends as he remember the words of one of his victims "...if you take my identity; I will take yours."

IDENTITY THEFT, Part One

by Valerie Hope

IF PEOPLE HAD ANY IDEA how easy it was to steal someone's identity, they'd never leave their houses. At least that's what I liked to believe, but I was glad that nobody really knew. I made my living off of other people's ignorance. My favorite part of the whole thing is that people tipped me to do it.

I threaded through the press of people during the dinner rush at Fresetti's Italian Restaurant, one of the most popular eateries in a very trendy part of town. It had been no problem for me to get a job waiting tables, and my utter lack of ambition for anything else kept me out there instead of getting moved around to shit jobs like sommalier or maitre'd or something else.

People asked me - Al, how do you manage to put up with all those people bitching at you, shouting at you, expecting you to cater to their every whim for 2.35 an hour plus tips and never lose your temper and not drop the smile from your face?

Easy. I hated those fuckers with a blinding passion, and it was easy not to lose my temper or stop smiling when I can look at them and know I'm soaking them for thousands of dollars, getting loans and credit cards and all manner of shit in their names and wrecking their credit. I could probably smile through somebody beating my ass if I knew I was going to get the last laugh. And nothing made me laugh harder than sticking it to some overprivileged asshole with a sense of entitlement who desperately deserved it.

It was so fucking easy, too. These fat overfed yuppies would come in and stuff their faces with antipasti and rigatoni and polish off bottle after bottle of wine and baskets of bread, enough to feed some Somali village for a month, and at the end after they were wiping the last of the tiramisu off of their bloated mouths, they'd slap down a Platinum Card and hand it to me without even looking.

It was my job to swipe those cards through the restaurant's card system to pay for the meal. But it was my distinct pleasure to swipe it through the little portable card-scanner in my pocket, bought online for sixty bucks, and capture their names, personal information and account numbers on a little chip. A good night, I could stock that thing up with 300 accounts easily. I tipped out, hung up my apron and went right out the door, my pocket stuffed full of tips given me by the very people I'd just ripped off.

Then it was over the six blocks to my brother's apartment. Ady could have been my twin, the same gawky six-foot frame and big feet, prominent adam's apple and pasty white skin and dark hair, the same patchy beard and big nose, the same slowly receding hairline and prominent brow over dark, quick eyes. Nothing to even look at twice, the homely-assed Hopkins brothers. We'd been close, growing up, without a dad and a mom who needed more

looking after than we did. I was only a year older, but Ady seemed to be the wiser one somehow. He was the one who actually didn't fuck around all through high school and took a few classes at junior college, just enough to get a knack for messing with computers. It was there he'd hatched this idea, and it had us in leather jackets, strip clubs and plasma screen TVs ever since.

I handed my full scanner over to him and he plugged it into his laptop before passing me an empty one to put back into my pocket. Then he downloaded all of the numbers into a database or something and emailed them off to our partners, Lyndon and Sid. We didn't even know where these two guys lived, but we met once a week to split everything up. They had the press capabilities and shit like that, wherever they were, and they'd come to us either with cash, merchandise or clean credit cards that they'd made themselves.

It was the same this night, just like all the others. I was all smiles and good cheer, loving every second of the double life I was leading, smiling to their faces while I stabbed their backs. Little did I know the import of Table 16, and the impact it would have on my entire life.

She was slender, one of those girls with a body more like a little boy's while still being inexplicably feminine and very attractive. She was there with a friend of hers, a shaggy-maned blonde who I'd ripped off about two months ago. One of the reasons that I was the point man for our little business endeavor was that I had a great memory for faces, and it didn't do to try and pop the same mark twice in a row. As it stood, I was only at this restaurant for a few more weeks before I split and went across time and hired on there. It paid to keep moving around, no matter how rich the hunting grounds were.

I came to refill their water once more, all smiles and flirtation that were, for the first time that night, a little genuine. I would have taken either of the women to bed in a heartbeat, given the choice, even though I knew that would never happen. Another key element of being point man was to be unnoticeable. I did that very well, and played the "dumb and sweet" act very well, so no one suspected that the somewhat dim but very enthusiastic waiter where they ate last week was the one who ripped them off and wrecked their credit for the next six years.

"Can I get you ladies anything else? Dessert?" I asked hopefully.

"Nope," the slender, dark-haired one said, giving me an appreciative once-over. That was good - I'd used a cardiologist's stolen card number to buy a Bowflex about three months ago and the results were starting to get noticed. "Just the check."

"You got it," I said. "Be right back."

* * *

"Is that him?" Kendra asked her friend and sister, Maggie.

The large-hipped blonde nodded, trying not to shoot evil looks at him. "I watched him for a month. He's really slick, but I saw him do it. He's been ripping people off in here for months, I'm sure of it. He's the one that got me evicted."

"He doesn't look capable of it," Kendra said.

"I guess that's why he's so good at it," Maggie answered. "You have any trouble preparing the spell?"

"Nope," Kendra said. "It's contingent on him, now. If he steals from me, the spell will take effect. If there's any purity in his heart at all, he'll be spared."

"Do you think I'm overreacting?" Maggie asked honestly.

"No, honey, I don't," Kendra said. "He stole from you. Caused you no end of pain and stress for no other reason than temporary personal gain. The universe demands that he repay his debts, and we can see to it that happens."

"I don't know - it's hard not to feel a little guilty," Maggie said, looking back at him.

"Of course it is," Kendra replied. "You're human. You have to feel *something*. But we have a higher calling, Maggs, and it's not always the most pleasant of tasks we're set to. But it will be justice, and there's no indication that the spell will take effect at all. Maybe he'll surprise us. And maybe there's happiness in store for him even if the spell *does* take effect. The universe and the Goddess work in very mysterious ways."

"I guess you're right," Maggie said, with her shy smile.

"You know I'm right," Kendra said. "Now shh. Here he comes."

* * *

I set the leather folder with the bill on the edge of the table with a smile. "It's been a pleasure taking care of you," I told them, milking it for the tip.

The skinny, dark-haired one took the check. "You were great - " she looked at my name tag " - Al. Is that short for Alan?"

"Alistair, believe it or not," I told her. "My mother was British."

"Cool name. I'm Kendra."

I shook her offered hand. "Pleasure," I said, and meant it. This girl was *hot*.

She slipped a platinum card into the wallet and handed it to me with a flirtatious smile. "You're not going to go and steal my identity, now, are you?" she asked.

I didn't even blink. "What makes you think I'd do that?"

"I saw a special - 20/20, Dateline, something like that, about identity theft. They said that passing over your credit card to somebody was like, a hundred times more dangerous than shopping online."

"I'm not going to steal your identity," I told her reassuringly.

"That's good," she said. "'Cause if you did, I'd steal yours right back."

"That sounds fair," I said, hefting the leather wallet with the ticket and her, soon *my*, credit card.

"Glad you think so, Alistair," she said with a cryptic smile. I couldn't help returning the grin, and backpedaled away to get one last look. Damn, what a hottie. I almost felt a little guilty as I swiped her card through the scanner in my pocket. She wasn't *that* hot.

* * *

"Light night," I told my brother as I flopped on his sofa. He was downloading the scanned card numbers into his laptop. "I only got about a hundred."

"Shit," Ady said. "I was hoping for a big score. It's about time you quit that place and moved on to another one, and it would be nice to get some nice fat accounts to deal with while you're looking for another gig."

"That's like, three days - to find another job waiting tables," I told him, sipping a beer.

"Maybe not, the economy sucks and there's not jobs like there used to be."

"Whatever," I said. "There's always jobs waiting tables."

"Listen, man, I don't want you scudding around some damn T.G.I. Friday's. We're talking Four Seasons here, someplace where we can make some big motherfucking scores," Ady said. "Sometimes finding gigs like that takes time. Remember how long it took you to get the gig you have right now?"

"Yeah, I guess you're right," I said. "Got anything promising?"

"That's for Lyndon and Sid to figure out over at Hogwarts, not us," Ady said. "We just bring 'em the numbers, they do all the wizard shit. But yeah, looks like a lot of these are platinum accounts."

"Cool," I said, sitting back and putting my feet up from my long night. "Cause I really want one of those 60-inch plasma screens."

* * *

We got the call on Wednesday, and met at a neighborhood bar with Lyndon and Sid to split the take. Even half-blinded from moving from the bright sidewalk into the darkened bar lit only by the flickering light of the baseball game on television, they were impossible to miss. Sid was the typical oily used-car-salesman type with a loud suit, lots of gold chains and the little mustachios over his lip. He fancied himself quite the ladies' man and probably got a lot more play than he should have, given that he was such a weasel, but the fat gangsta roll of hundreds in his pocket usually got the girls' attention when he went out. Lyndon was his muscle, six-foot-four of enormous bad attitude, with a shaved pink head that met wide shoulders without a hint of a neck. His massive forearms, sleeved from shoulders to wrists with elaborate tattoos, were propped on the table, nursing a pint of beer.

"Hey boys, come and siddown," Sid bade, throwing his arms wide. He grabbed my face in both hands and gave me a kiss as I was seating myself.

"What was that for?" I asked, a little grossed out.

"That's for my little miracle worker. You actually pulled a card off somebody with completely perfect credit. And I mean *perfect*, too. Score of eight-fifty. We stand to make close to fifty grand off of her," Sid said.

"Really? Do you remember who it is?" Ady asked.

"Some chick named Kendra Meadows," Lyndon said in his basso rumble. "Ring a bell?"

"Yeah," I said, eyes brightening. "She was in there Sunday night. She flirted with me a little, and she was fucking hot, too. If I hadn't just ripped her off I might have tried to nail her. I

remember, though, cause she was saying she'd just seen some thing on TV about identity theft and said if I stole her identity she was gonna steal mine."

Sid laughed. "Funny," he said. He dug into his inside pocket. "Why don't we let her pay for our drinks, then, whaddaya say?"

He pulled out an Amex and passed it over the bar. The bartender took it and slid it through - it never left our sight, nobody was going to steal what we rightfully stole - and served up the next round. I got my bourbon and coke and just had a sip when the bartender handed the card back to Sid.

"Ow!" he cried, dropping the card and shaking his hand up and down rapidly.

"What the hell?" Ady asked.

"That card! I swear to God the damn thing shocked me!" Sid said.

"That's impossible. It's plastic," Lyndon corrected.

"Impossible my ass," Sid shot back. "My fucking hand is tingling."

"Look, I'll show you," Lyndon said, grabbing for the card, and he too jerked his hand back from contact with it. "Jesus!"

"Let me see that," Ady said, and grabbed for it. He jumped when his fingers touched the plastic and he stuffed them in his mouth with a hiss of surprise and pain.

Reluctantly, Sid picked up the card - this time with no pain. He inspected it from all angles, holding it up the nonesuch light in the bar. "Crazy," he commented, almost under his breath. "Never seen a card do that before. Maybe it got some kind of a charge or something from the reader or something."

"Never heard of anything like that before," I told him. "It's a brand-new card, right?"

"Got it this morning," Lyndon said, sucking his finger. *He means they made it this morning*, I thought.

"Anyway, kid, it's yours," Sid said. "Have a blast."

He pitched me the card. I snagged it out of mid-air and a bolt of chilly tingles shot up my arm, making my hair stand on end. I bobbed it a couple times, then recovered. It lay there in my palm while I tried to cover the pins-and-needles from fingertips to elbow. I wasn't about to let these guys see me as a wimp, and maybe even take my card away for being a novelty.

"Thanks," I said, tucking it into my pocket. "Anything else?"

"A bunch of loans," Lyndon told us, "they should have funds available from your accounts by the end of the week. I'll call you when they're cleared, then cash them out and close the accounts, just like all the other times."

"Should be a decent ten grand payday all around, less expenses," Sid said.

"That should hold me long enough to find a new gig," I said. "I think it's time to move on. I've hit enough people where I'm at, it's going to start looking suspicious if I stay longer."

"Agreed," Sid said. "How long d'you think it'll take, kid?"

"I dunno, give me three weeks and I'll know a lot more," I said.

"Okay, then, we meet here in three weeks and see where we're at. In the meantime, boys, have a real good time," Sid said, tossing back his vodka and standing up. He signed the credit card receipt and tapped the bar twice, heading out into the sunlight with Lyndon right behind.

I looked at my brother, still trying to shake some life into his hand. "You okay?" I asked, trying to ignore the tingling in my own extremity.

"Yeah," Ady said. "Weird, though."

"Yeah, never seen a card do that before," I said.

"Never can tell," Ady said, shrugging and reaching for his rum and coke. "Maybe it's some new anti-theft thing or something. They're always trying to come up with new shit that puts honest businessmen like us out of business."

I raised my glass. "Fuck 'em," I toasted.

He clinked his glass against mine. "Take the money and run," he said.

* * *

I guess there's no way to determine when a certain day is the most important day of your life. When you wake up, piss, scratch your ass and click on the television, it *feels* like it's just another day. Nothing smelled different or looked different, and I certainly didn't feel any different. Nothing, not a single clue to distinguish yesterday from any one of the thousands of other days I'd lived when absolutely nothing had happened. But that didn't stop the universe from knowing how important yesterday was, and it was more than content to let me just blunder through like an imbecile, going about my compartmentalized little life one step at a time the way I always did without the faintest suspicion that everything had changed on me while I'd been asleep. As I sat there at my table slurping coffee and watching CNN, the only thing I noticed was that I felt vaguely queasy and my scalp itched a lot more than usual. These were my clues to the vastness of yesterday, and all they really made me do was resolve to put some Selsun Blue on my whiteboard for shit to get at the grocery store.

I sat heavily on my black leather couch and visualized where I was going to put my brand-new plasma screen television - ordered online yesterday - when it occurred to me how much I hated that couch. I looked at it with a sense of near revulsion, which should have probably pinged as strange considering that I'd loved it when I got it three months ago. I'd thought it suited me down to the ground, and went well with the rest of my stuff. Now I just thought it was a damn eyesore. Not to mention the various feelings of malaise I was starting to feel about the rest of my stuff.

Some weird burst of energy hit me, like a bunch of Red Bull hitting my system all at once. It felt great. I ran downstairs and to the liquor store across the street and gathered up all the boxes they had in their alley, brought them up to my place and started sorting all my stuff into piles that I wanted to keep and the stuff that was going to Goodwill. The Goodwill pile was *much* larger than the keeper pile. I was only really keeping the CD/MP3 player, the computer, most of the kitchen gadgets, my bed, and a bunch of bookcases. I was sorting through my CD collection - and not keeping much, honestly - when the burst of energy faded away and I looked at mess I'd made. Or not really a mess. Everything was stacked neatly in boxes, but it was the majority of my stuff. I'd even gutted my closet, tossing clothes right and

left, until all that was left hanging on the rod were a few button-down white dress shirts for work, a couple pairs of slacks and a bowling shirt I'd picked up at a secondhand shop. One pair of shoes, and there were some t-shirts and a couple pairs of jeans in a drawer. The rest of it - and there was Armani in there, and Hugo Boss, I was an identity thief for Chrissakes, I deserved to look good when I wanted to - were in garbage bags sitting by the door of my bedroom.

I know I *felt* like I should be alarmed by all of this, but I wasn't. I felt strangely satisfied inside, and not just because of the sense of accomplishment. I mean I felt really good about the whole thing, about tagging and bagging my life to be carried away. I honestly couldn't keep from smiling as I moved all the boxes to a central location near the front door and called the donation center. I wasn't even really going to have anyplace to sit after it was gone, just a computer chair and the barstools I'd decided to keep, but I didn't worry. I had over fifty thousand dollars worth of credit that I could spend on new stuff, and it would only take a few hours online before everything was being brought to me.

I poured myself another cup of coffee, smiling. It would be a lot easier to replace everything once I saw the apartment empty. I sat in my computer chair and hoped that the donation center volunteers and their truck would be here very soon.

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I stood out on my stoop, watching the burly, sweaty donation center volunteers manhandling all my stuff out the door and into the back of their panel truck, sipping my coffee and admiring my own resourcefulness - everything was being done for me and it gave me a perverse sense of satisfaction. Curious, I peeked into the back of the van, to see how things were progressing, and saw that they'd already made one stop before they got to me. A really nice suede sofa and two matching recliners were pressed against the cab-side wall. A really nice, really *familiar* suede sofa and recliners.

"Hey, those are my brother's," I said to no one in particular.

"Does he live over on Hamilton Avenue?" one of the volunteers asked me.

"Yeah, in a loft over the bakery," I replied.

"That's his shit, then," the volunteer said. "He's getting rid of everything, just like you are. We were there for about two hours hauling stuff out. I swear he barely has a milk crate left in there. Y'all two guys must be wanting to make a change, I guess."

"Yeah, I guess so," I said, a little bemused and bewildered.

"Well, best of luck," the man told me, depositing a box stuffed full of designer clothes on the lift-gate. "Shit, I probably ought to think about doing something like this myself, if I had the money. Must be nice, to get all the old crap out of your life and get all new."

I thought about it for a second. "Yeah, it is," I said. "It feels - I dunno - like I'm lighter inside. Not all that shit weighing me down, y'know?"

"Yeah, I hear that all the time," the volunteer said.

"You almost done in there?" I asked, suddenly wanting to be alone with my thoughts.

"Just the furniture left," he said. "Should only take about fifteen minutes, then we'll be out of your hair."

"Cool, I really appreciate all this," I said, already starting to withdraw into myself.

"No problem, we'll put it to good use."

"Great," I said, already gone, my mind a million miles away.

* * *

They'd been true to their word, and about fifteen minutes later I was alone in my empty apartment, sitting on the edge of my tub while the water ran. I never took baths, but something just sounded so appealing to me about sitting immersed in hot water that I decided to go out on a limb. I'd poured a little bit of Vitamin E oil on top of the water, dimly remembering having read somewhere that it felt nice. A part of my mind was a little bit alarmed that I was acting so far out of character with myself, but the majority of my mind was calm and accepting - it's like I had no doubts in my mind that this was a great idea, that I'd enjoy it and it all made perfect sense except for this one little niggling voice in the back saying *you don't act this way* that was easy to shout down if I tried.

I swung my legs into the deliciously hot water and sank down slowly until the water was just above my nipples. I sighed out the last of the stress and confusion and soaked, thinking deep thoughts about nothing.

I have no idea how long I just sat there, studying in detail the insides of my eyelids - there was something magical about the bath that made time seem somehow less meaningful. It could have been ten minutes or ten hours before I finally reached across myself to take hold of the fluffy Egyptian cotton washcloth draped over the edge of the tub, soak it in the fragrant steaming water and begin to lightly scrub the last few hours from my skin.

With every stroke of the cloth, however, my skin seemed to stretch and gather up on the leading edge, as if it were somehow coming loose. More curious than alarmed, I played with it for a while, scrubbing different spots on my body and watching strangely as my skin bunched up where I dragged the cloth across. The parts of skin seemed to hang a little loosely for a moment before they recoiled. I'd read somewhere that skin could do this when someone was really dehydrated, so I resolved to drink more water and dismissed the whole phenomenon.

The languorousness of the bath destroyed by this new development, though, I finished my wash with a briskness and purpose, feeling strangely disappointed, and got out. I wrapped myself in a towel and dried off without watching the strange looseness in my skin and how certain areas beneath my arms and behind my knees seemed to bag out a little, like I was some kind of old man. I poured myself a huge glass of water, and sat at the computer to start shopping online for new things for my apartment.

I don't know why I didn't notice until about three hours later that the pruney fingers from my bath were still pruney. I guess it just hadn't seemed very important.

* * *

I was sitting on a folding chair at a folding table where my computer was set up, browsing the internet for a new computer table. I'd already gotten what I needed for the bathroom, deciding to re-do the whole thing in black, white and baby pink. I'd found an online design tool and had

fallen in love with the color selection, it was so cute. Sure, some of the guys might think it was a little bit gay, but I really didn't care because it appealed to me so much. I was looking through the catalogs online when my phone rang.

"Hey, Al, it's Ady," my brother said, his voice sounding a little husky.

"You okay, man?" I asked back.

"Yeah, I think I'm coming down with something. Listen, have you heard anything from Sid or Lyndon? They were supposed to call me today and I'm starting to get worried."

"You think they got popped?"

"I don't know, man. I guess it's possible. But they have a whole shitload of our money. I'd kinda like to know where the fuck they are."

"Yeah. I know they have a place on Harbor Avenue," I said.

"I already checked there, and the bar. Nothing, nobody's seen them."

"What about the place over on Hoover?" I asked.

"What place on Hoover?"

"Flophouse, over in the warehouse district. Used to be Lyndon's old place, now they just use it for storage, I think."

"Listen, Al, I feel like ass. I need you to go over there and try to find them. Will you do that for me?" Ady asked.

"Sure, man. Hey, can I get you something while I'm out?"

"What?" Ady asked, shocked. "All the years we've been brothers and you've never asked me if I needed you to get me anything when I was sick."

"I dunno, it just seemed like the right thing to say."

"Well, it was really sweet," Ady told me.

"Sweet? You're calling me sweet? Shit, you must be dying over there," I quipped.

"Sorry. But it *was*, y'know. If you wouldn't mind getting me something for a headache and gut cramps, then yeah. That would be really..."

"Sweet?" I offered.

"Yeah, sweet. Fuck off."

"Cool, man, I'll be over there in a while."

I hung up and grabbed my keys and jacket.

* * *

The drive across town to the warehouse district was a bitch, through crosstown traffic and some major pedestrian areas. I spent about twenty minutes fuming at extra-long traffic lights and was in a foul mood by the time I pulled up down the block from the loft where Lyndon and

Sid had no assurance of being. I took the stairs two at a time, slipped, and barked my knee hard against one of the rickety steps.

"Shit!" I cried.

Had my foot slipped? That's not what it felt like. I didn't even want to think what it felt like. It felt like the skin around my foot slipped, like I was wearing a pair of trousers that were too big for me. *But that's just crazy*, I thought. *It's not possible, I'd be bleeding all over the fucking staircase. It must be my imagination.*

I stood carefully and took the stairs at a more reasonable pace, finally stopping at the door that was more paint than wood and knocked six times, then a pause, then three more.

"Who's there?" a muffled voice said from the other side.

"It's Al," I said. "Let me in, Sid."

There were several muffled *thumps* and some cursing, then the sounds of footsteps crossing the rickety planking and the clicking of several deadbolts being thrown back. He opened the door onto a designer paradise.

The floors were laminate in a light wood, like birch, and the sofa and armchairs white linen with chrome legs and appointments. Light wood cabinets formed an extravagant entertainment center. Lyndon was manhandling a giant plasma screen TV into place. Cardboard and styrofoam made an enormous heap in one corner - all of this stuff was new. Over the white enameled bar I could see all-new copper-bottomed cookware set out, ready to be washed and then put in the brand-new glass-front cabinets. Even the fixtures and sink looked new. An unopened box with a food processor was on the counter, and some sacks which looked like they contained bottles of wine and spices.

"What the hell is going on?" I asked.

Sid shrugged. "We got sick of the old place. Me and Lyndon decided to fix this place up and move in here. You like it?"

I was unable to hold on to my anger, because the place was indeed *gorgeous*. "Yeah, I really do," I told him.

"Cool. Listen, whaddaya want, Al? We have the guys doing the bathroom coming in about half an hour and we wanted to start hanging pictures."

"You need an area rug in here," I said, walking in. "The front room needs more color. You said you were going to call today. Ady was worried that you two mighta got popped, we were starting to get a little worried."

"God, I'm sorry, I totally forgot," Lyndon said, looking crestfallen.

Lyndon *apologizing*? And looking legitimately *repentant*? I'd once seen him break a man's thumbs for being late on a two hundred dollar loanshark payment and tell him to grow a pair. He never apologized to anyone.

"You guys okay?" I asked.

"Sure," Sid said. "We just got busy, y'know, lost track of time. Tell Ady everything's fine. The money's in all our accounts, just cash 'em out and close 'em like always."

He grabbed up a thick envelope off of an adorable little pedestal table by the door and handed it to me. "It's the last of the cards. Use 'em and lose 'em, you know the drill."

"Thanks, this will make Ady feel better."

"Is he sick?" Lyndon asked, again looking concerned.

"He says he's got some stomach thing going on, and a bad headache. I'm going by there right after this to take him some medicine."

"That's really sweet," Lyndon said, returning to his work.

"That's weird," I said. "Ady just said the same thing."

"Well, they're both right," Sid confirmed. "It is sweet. It's a sweet thing to do."

"I guess," I said, backing away. Something definitely weird was going on. "Hey, have you guys noticed anything strange happening lately?"

"Strange how?" Sid asked.

"I dunno. Strange. Feeling weird, weird things happening, that kind of shit."

"Just a burning desire to get this loft finished," Sid said.

"I've had a lot more energy lately," Lyndon said. "Sid and me have been going round the clock, seems like, and I don't seem to get tired at all."

"Yeah, me too," Sid said, nodding.

"Oh. Okay."

"You all right, Al?" Lyndon asked.

Since when have you given a shit about my well-being, you tank? "I guess so. It just seems like strange shit is happening and I'm the only one noticing."

"I read an article in some magazine - mighta been *Newsweek* - that sometimes our brains have to re-orient themselves to their surroundings, particularly if their surroundings change real fast," Lyndon said. "It's completely natural, but the article said that it happens just like you said, like everything seems really strange but nobody seems to notice it but you."

Lyndon read an article? Lyndon read anything? It's a world gone mad.

"Thanks," I said. "I'll have to check that out."

"Come back by when we finish the place," Sid invited. "We're already talking about throwing a little thing, inviting some people over."

"I'll tell Ady, sounds like fun," I said. "I better run, go take care of my brother."

"Take care, drive safe," Sid said, holding the door for me.

"Bye, sweetie," Lyndon said from behind a bookcase.

I didn't even stop to think about that huge dumptruck of a man calling me *sweetie*. Of all the weird shit I was seeing, that seemed to register so low that I barely even detected it. I hustled out the door as quick as I could and headed around the corner to the drugstore.

* * *

I stood at the CVS register impatiently, hopping up and down a little, wanting to get out of there and back to my brother so he could help me try and work out what the hell was happening to the world around me. Ady was always the one with the cool head. If anybody could help me figure this out, it would be him.

The woman ahead of me seemed unable to grasp the concept that film wasn't developed anywhere else in the store but the film lab, and I think she meant to pay for her Milk of Magnesia in pennies and nickels. I sighed and turned my attention to the magazine rack, scanning the titles quickly just to pass the time. It wasn't until I was able to look past the smooth perfection of Angelina Jolie's cleavage that I noticed on the cover of *Vanity Fair* a slug for an article about brain chemistry. Grabbing the magazine, I opened it to the contents and then to the article. Sure enough, it was the one that Lyndon referenced.

More amazed even that Lyndon had read something other than a racing form, much less retained it well enough to repeat to another human being, one thing struck me in particular: why in the hell was Legbreaker Lyndon Sullivan reading *Vanity Fair*?

"You gonna buy that?"

I was snapped from my reverie by the pimply-faced young man at the register. I put the magazine back on the rack quickly, almost tearing it in my haste, and plopped my purchases down on the counter. I looked everywhere but the clerk as I listened to the faraway *beeping* of the items being run through the scanner.

The rhythm stopped and I looked over just in time to see him lean into the microphone. "Manager to register one, manager to register one."

The manager peeked his head around an aisle of greeting cards - it was a small store - and raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Price on the O.P.I. nail color?" the clerk asked.

"Eighty-five a bottle, but it's buy two get one free," the manager said, and went back behind the birthday cards.

I bought nail polish? I thought incredulously.

He ran the last of the items through and I handed him a credit card - whose, I have no idea. He handed me the sack and I was through the doors before he'd even gotten halfway through his bored, listless "have a nice day."

I looked into the sack in horror. Besides the ibuprofen, the Imodium and Pepto Bismol for my brother, a big bottle of Gatorade for dehydration, there were also three bottles of nail polish, a barrette with a garish plastic butterfly on it, a bottle of lavender-scented bath oil and a romance novel.

I didn't even remember picking them up, but I had the vague uneasy feeling that the last weren't for my brother, that I'd bought them for myself.

I looked again in the sack, hoping that I'd just been drugged, that this was just some bad acid I took three years ago coming back to haunt me. My pruney bathtub fingers clutched the sack hard and I tried to shut my eyes and will it away. I wasn't crazy. I remember things *not* being like this. But I also began to remember that even when I was stuffing the *Vanity Fair* back into the rack, my eyes had lingered over the *Cosmo* and *Vogue* with an eye to buying them, as well as thinking to myself *should I get Ady a card to go with all this?* and thinking how nice it would be to see my brother smile. I'd even been considering flowers.

What the hell was going on?

To be continued...



SUMMARY: Being part of a ring of identity thieves, one of the gang starts to notice changes about himself and his friends as he remember the words of one of his victims "...if you take my identity; I will take yours."

IDENTITY THEFT, Part Two

by Valerie Hope

WHATEVER WAS HAPPENING TO ME, I was sure my brother Ady could help me muddle through it. He had always been the smart one, mom's favorite, while I'd been the cute and cuddly one, and somehow my brother had always backed me up, even though we spent the majority of our youth beating one another senseless. I was holding on to that hope as hard as I could as I parked in the slip in front of his apartment and climbed the short flight of stairs to his place.

I let myself in with my own key and was stupefied to stillness. Like me, like Sid and Lyndon, Ady had gotten rid of virtually everything he owned. He was stretched out on a futon in his empty apartment, watching something on his big-screen TV. He was shrouded in blankets and he looked, honestly, like hammered shit.

"Hey," I said, clicking on the one halogen lamp he'd left himself. "You shouldn't watch TV in the dark, you know that."

"What the fuck ever," he said back.

I plopped the bag - minus my extra purchases - onto the futon beside him, *thumped* my back into his wall and slid down until I was seated on the floor.

"Love what you've done with the place," I muttered.

"Shut up, I'm getting new shit in tomorrow. Didja find Lyndon and Sid?"

"Yeah, they're moving into the place on Harbor," I said. "They were fixing it up when I got there, it's pretty nice."

"Wish they'd told somebody," Ady breathed.

I pitched him the envelope with his share of the credit cards in it. "Those are yours and Sid says the money's in our accounts. We should cash 'em out and close 'em ASAP."

"Yeah, yeah," Sid said, digging through the bag. "You rock. Thanks."

He was tearing the safety seal off of the ibuprofen when I looked up and noticed what was on the muted television. "Hey, the Ultimate Fighting Championship is on," I said.

"I know, I just want to watch the end of this," Ady said, shaking up the Gatorade.

"What the hell - holy shit, man, are you watching *Gilmore Girls*?"

"Yeah, so? It's funny," he said. "I'm kinda into it."

"Do any of these chicks get naked or anything?" I asked.

"No," Ady said. "But it's still good. It's funny as hell. You should give it a try."

I swallowed hard. "Have you noticed anything weird going on, Ady?" I asked.

"Weird how?"

"I dunno, like - like all of us getting rid of all of our stuff on the same day. Like you saying I'm sweet and Lyndon reading *Vanity Fair*. Like me feeling like my skin's too loose and Sid not making a call because he's too into redecorating."

"Why is that weird?" Ady said.

"Because none of us act that way."

"Apparently, we do," Ady told me. "Dude, you need to relax, okay? Where is all this stress coming from? Is it changing jobs, finding a new gig? Take a couple days, it's cool."

"See? There you go!" I exclaimed. "You're usually the one with his size twelve all the way up in my ass to get a new gig so we can keep making money, and now you're telling me that I should take a few days off? That's *weird*. What the fuck is happening?"

"Nothing's happening," Ady said. "I can't be concerned that my big brother is stressed out? I can't worry about him and want him to feel better? That's *weird*?"

"It is when you just start doing it out of the fucking blue, when you never have before."

He waved me off. "You're looking at this all wrong, then. Maybe you should be thankful that people are taking an interest in your well-being, bro. Maybe you should enjoy the hell out of it 'cause maybe it's been a long time coming. Sid and me and Lyndon all know it - even with all our technical knowhow, you're still the one out there grabbing the numbers, putting yourself at risk and hustling your ass off so we can all get rich. So hell yeah, we want you happy and healthy."

"I guess I never thought of it that way," I said.

"That's because your head is way too deep in the game, son," Ady said. "Listen. Get the hell out of here, go put on something nice and head downtown. Find yourself some nice piece of ass and nail her. I'll be fine. I'm just gonna sit here and watch TV."

"Watch *Gilmore Girls*," I corrected him.

"Fine, then, watch *Gilmore Girls* and then go to sleep a little later so maybe I won't feel like a bruised turd when the deliverymen come tomorrow. You should at least take the night, go out, have a good time. You have a shitpot full of laundered money, so go buy some guy a few drinks and then go get laid."

"Waitaminnit," I said, on point like a hunting hound. "Did you just say buy some *guy* a few drinks?"

"What the - shit. I dunno. Maybe. I'm sick, you bastard. You know what I meant. Buy some girl a few drinks and get in her pants, all right? Quit fucking reading everything into everything I say, I'm not calling you a queer, okay?"

"Okay, then," I said, still a little alarmed - not because he'd said it, he called me gay all the time, but because it hadn't sounded weird until after a few seconds. "I guess you're right."

"Your little brother is always right, shit stain."

"Now that's not weird," I said, smiling. "You calling me sweet creeps me out. You calling me a shit stain makes me feel a lot better."

"I'm going to call you worse than that if you don't get the fuck out of here and let me watch my fucking show, asswipe," Ady said.

"Fuck you, you have it TiVo'ed."

"Get out anyway, you're giving me ass cramps."

I stood up. "Feel better, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah. Fuck off."

I left feeling a great deal better. For a minute I almost thought he might tell me he loved me or something really creepy like that. Knowing that I gave him ass cramps made me feel like the world was put to rights again.

Until I saw the nail polish in my front seat.

I sighed, closed my eyes and counted to ten. I stuffed the polish into the glove box and drove away, more determined than ever to follow my brother's advice. Some girl in this fucking town was going to know I didn't wear any damn nail polish. That was for *damn* sure.

* * *

Club Distress was pretty typical - dark, overpriced and smelly - but thick with potential for the kind of night I had in mind. I was wearing the best I had left since my purge, a black silk shirt with a wide collar, a knit wool blazer and tailored pants. It had been a bitch of a time getting them to hang right - I'd lost some weight, and the sleeves of the shirt and coat and the cuffs of the trousers seemed too long, like possibly I'd even lost some height as well. Chalking it up to not making any fucking sense at all, like most of the last few days, I arranged my clothes to look the best I could and went out with about five hundred dollars in my wallet and my Rolex artfully displayed. A twenty to the doorman had gotten me through the rope and into the smoky, thumping interior of the dance club.

I did my usual, I pushed to the bar and got myself a beer and then put my back to the wall to survey the scene. The women were dressed for clubbing - which meant exciting and revealing - and were the predominant ones on the dance floor. The men tended to stay towards the perimeter, only going out to dance when they'd spotted likely prey. I moved up to the rail, at a little table, to do the same, running my eyes covetously over the broad selection of races, builds, hair colors, tattoos and price ranges. I'd dismissed a leggy blond who insisted on Grey Goose martinis as too rich for my blood and a hyperactively happy Oriental girl with a cheap dress as probably jailbait. I was just beginning to move towards a particularly promising knot of college-aged women who would be incredibly ripe for my too-smooth line of bullshit when a long-nailed hand came to rest on my forearm.

I turned to see a petite brunette in a sequined tube dress with big brown eyes, giving me a great big veneered smile and a gentle squeeze. "Aren't you Al Hopkins?" she asked.

"I am," I said, turning towards her. "Do I know you?"

"You did," she said. "Jennifer. Jennifer Crowder, from high school. We were in Mrs. Essby's biology class together, I sat right behind you."

Oh wow. This is like a pick-up artist's dream come true. This girl would be on her back, sweating underneath me in a matter of hours.

"Oh my God, yes! Of course! How are you?" I asked, overly enthusiastic.

"I'm good. How have you been?"

"Can't complain," I said, making sure that she caught the flash of ten-thousand dollar Rolex as I set my beer down on the rail. "What are you doing these days?"

"I'm a hairdresser," she said sheepishly, shrugging and laughing at herself.

I decided to butter her up a little, make her think I thought more highly of her than I actually did. "You own your own salon?"

"Oh, God, no," she said, snorting laughter in a very annoying way. "I work at *Salon Riche* downtown. I want to open my own place, though. What are you doing?"

I shrugged and blushed with downcast eyes, ever the master of feigned humility. "I own a small business chartering jets to businessmen. Me and my brother."

"Oh, wow, you have your own airplanes?"

"Six of them," I said. "We're doing pretty well."

"Are you married?" she asked. *You're already asking me that?* I thought. *You must already be wet and ready if you're already asking me that one.*

"No, divorced," I lied. Women always wanted to make the broken-hearted one feel better. "We were together about three years, we just couldn't make it work."

"Kids?" she asked.

"No, thank goodness," I said. "I couldn't have handled a custody fight."

Her eyes went liquid with pity and compassion and I knew she was all mine. "How about you? Did you ever marry that guy you went out with - what was his name?" For all I knew she was a lesbian in high school, but this one usually worked.

"Rob Glover? Oh, Lord, no," she said, snorting again. If I wasn't so fixated on nailing her in a cheap motel room, that snort would have annoyed me no end. "I was engaged for a while, just out of junior college, but he went off to State and I stayed here, and it just didn't work out."

"I'm really sorry about that," I said before I could stop myself. Hell, no I wasn't sorry about that - I was relieved that she wasn't married. I wanted to nail this girl and then cut her loose, not commiserate with her! One-night stand Rule Number One: do *not* get them started on old relationships! What the fuck was I doing?

"Yeah, it's been kind of lonely, but I have a lot of friends," she said.

I have a cure for loneliness, I thought, but I heard myself saying, "I know how it is. I don't know what I would've done without my friends and my brother. Still, it's not quite the same, y'know?"

"Oh, totally," she said, gushing a little. "I feel like I'm, y'know, defective or something because I'm not in a relationship."

"That is so true," I told her, screaming at myself inside. *Stop this, you're ruining everything!* "This stupid society, it treats us like we're losers or second-class citizens if we're not with somebody. It's so unfair. I mean, can you *believe* Valentine's Day?"

"Oh my God, tell me about it," she said, both hands on my arm. "Last year I couldn't even get into a restaurant. I had to get McDonalds and sit at home, none of my friends wanted to go out with me, nothing. I felt like a total outcast."

"It's awful," I said. "And I mean, it's not like I don't *want* to be in a relationship or anything, I do. But I want it to be a good one, not just grabbing the first one that comes along. I'd like to think that I learned from my mistakes a little before I got divorced."

"Absolutely," she said. "Wow, you so get this."

"I guess I've just been through it."

"And you're really easy to talk to, did anybody ever tell you that?" she asked.

I moaned inside, watching any chance of hooking up with this air brain spiral slowly down the shitter. *Easy to talk to* was as bad as *like a big brother* or *great personality*. It was the kiss of death. I had to broom this bitch fast and move on if I had any hope of making it with another chick before last call.

"Thanks," I said.

"Hey, listen, do you want to go someplace a little quieter, catch up?" she asked me.

No, I want to stay here and have sex with a total stranger, why else do people come to places like this? I thought.

"That sounds great," I said out loud, without knowing why.

* * *

I left the International House of Pancakes amidst a crowd that didn't make the slightest bit of sense to me. Jennifer - Jenny, now that we were such good friends - had invited along the friends she'd gone out with originally, two fellow hairdressers named Natasha and Renée. We'd sat over pancakes for three and a half hours, talking about everything we could think of, mostly stuff that I seemed to have taken a deep and abiding interest in that I never gave a shit about before. We gossiped about celebrities - how I'd come to know so much about the *American Idol* contestants was a mystery - and weddings we'd been to (Natasha was six months away from marrying her boyfriend Scott), clothes and music and various clubs around town, how hard it was to be a vegetarian in this town, all number of things that I considered completely banal and pointless.

What was crazier still was that I enjoyed every second of it.

Once I'd accepted that I wasn't taking any of these women home for the evening I realized that the connection I made with them, just sitting and talking and listening and sharing experiences, was as good at - if not better in some ways - than the connection I might have made with them during sex. Oddly enough, I enjoyed the feeling of being close to them without actually being physically close. I left the place with new friends, potentially close friends, and that was much better in the aftermath than the awkwardness and guilt which followed my typical one-night stand. I got numbers in the memory of my mobile phone now that I *intended* to call back, and that was a first for me.

I got home just as the eastern sky was starting to become lighter, the deep velvet blue of night giving way to a leaden, feathery grey with tinges of yellow and orange. I stopped for a second to look at it - I don't think I ever really had looked at a sunrise before, even though I'd seen a bunch of them. It was beautiful, and the feeling of the world coming back to life like that was a great comfort. I couldn't keep from smiling as I fumbled for my keys and opened the door to go inside.

My almost-empty apartment was shrouded in pre-dawn gloom, but I didn't care. I was already committed to filling it back up with new, pretty things, and that quest in and of itself was enough to keep me from feeling depressed or empty. I kicked off my wingtips and flopped on the couch. Sleep came for me very quickly.

* * *

It felt like I'd only been asleep a few minutes when the phone rang, but sunlight was streaming through my venetian blinds and covering me in golden stripes. I brushed my hair out of my eyes and fumbled around for my phone, finding it under an old newspaper.

"H'llo?" I mumbled, my voice gravelly.

"Hey, Al, it's Ady," my brother piped, sounding altogether too cheerful. "What's up?"

"Nothing," I grunted, sitting up. "What time is it?"

"Eight o'clock," Ady said.

"Jesus," I swore. "Why the fuck are you calling so early?"

"I wanted to see what you were doing today," Ady said.

"Looking for a job," I answered.

"Forget that," Ady said. "Look, I thought about what you said the other night. About things being kinda weird and stuff. You might be right."

"Really?" I said, feeling suddenly more awake.

"Yeah, really. Look, Al, I was checking my stocks this morning," he told me. "That big block of biotech stocks I bought last month on that tip just took a fucking nose dive. I lost close to half a mil."

"That sucks, man," I said. "But what does that have to do with what I said last night?"

"I lost close to half a mil, bro, and I didn't even *care*. I just, like, shrugged and shit and went back to ordering curtains for my new place. And it didn't even bother me for like, an hour, when I started wondering how I was going to pay for all this shit I'm buying."

"That is weird," I said. "You go apeshit when you lose money in the market. You almost beat the shit out of that broker at the bar last time that happened, and you'd only lost, like, twenty grand."

"I know," Ady said. "It's kinda alarming. I mean, fucking *listen* to me. I'm not upset at all. And here's the really weird part."

"Yeah?"

"There I was, looking at my stocks, just like I do every morning," he told me. "And I was looking at it and I swear to Christ it was like I'd never seen any of that shit before. I had Bloomberg on in the background like I always do and I didn't understand any of it."

"What, like they were talking another language?" I asked.

"No, man," Ady clarified. "I mean I didn't understand what any of the words meant."

"Bullshit," I said. "You've been playing the market for years."

"I swear, bro," Ady said. "I didn't have any clue what the fuck they were talking about."

"What did you do?"

"Called a brokerage house," I said. "Transferred my whole portfolio to a broker. Until I figure out what's wrong with me, I don't need to be managing my own finances, but I can't just liquidate and get out of the market right now."

"So you're actually letting somebody else play with your money? You swore you'd eat your own balls before you let somebody do that, remember?" I asked.

"Oh, I remember all right," Ady said. "That's how bad this freaked me out, man."

"So, why the fuck did you just tell me you only called to see what I was doing?" I asked.

"I don't know, man. I opened my mouth and those were the words that came out. I don't fucking know where the hell they came from."

"What do you think we should do?" I asked.

"I dunno, I'm asking you," he said. "Ever heard of anything like this before?"

"Better call the Cutter," I said. "Maybe he's got some ideas."

"That motherfucker creeps me out," Ady said.

"I'll go with you," I said. "Maybe he's heard of this before or something."

"Right," Ady said. "Call him. I'll be by in about an hour to pick you up."

* * *

By the time Ady got there, I was standing in front of my closet in my boxers, tossing hanger after hanger of clothing onto my bed. My brother had let himself in with my key and looked at me strangely.

"What the fuck are you doing, man?" he asked.

"I can't find anything to fucking wear," I said. Everything I had seemed to bore the shit out of me. I can't say I'd ever had this problem before. I was the guy with the favorite shirt that I'd worn every other day for the last sixteen years. I *never* got bored with an article of clothing. I still had underwear from junior high, and I still wore it.

"Just fucking pick something," he said, trying to rush me. He sorted through some of the 'discard' pile on my bed and held it up. "Here, you'll look cute in this."

"You think so? It's not too orange?" I said. "Waitaminnit. What the fuck did you just say to me?"

"I said you'd look good in this," Ady shot back, looking annoyed.

"No you didn't," I accused. "You said I'd look cute in it."

"Fuck you, I did not," Ady said. "Look, will you just fucking get dressed? The Cutter's expecting us and I don't want to keep that creepshow waiting, all right?"

I snatched the hanger out of his hand. "Fine," I said. I know I sounded huffy, but I didn't care. I stomped into the bathroom and slammed the door.

* * *

Ady was beside himself by the time I came out. Truth be told, I was pretty freaked out myself. Normally I checked my face and hair, brushed my teeth and I was ready to go. But somehow, this time, there was something more that needed to be done - some gel for my hair because it wasn't sticking up like I wanted it to, cleaning my ears... I even dug up some lotion because my skin was looking a little dry. It seemed to take forever but something wasn't letting me leave until everything was just right.

Plus that, my skin was starting to sag. My face, which was the reason I got big tips as a waiter, with my clear skin and chiseled features, was now puffy and jowly. It seemed to move like it was no longer attached to the muscle and bone underneath when I touched it. And it wasn't just my face, it was like that all over my body now. The only places where my skin didn't seem to be hanging off of my bones was across my pectorals and my cheeks and ass.

"Fucking took you long enough," Ady complained when I finally emerged.

"Fuck off," I said. "Let's go."

We took Ady's Lincoln across town to the warehouse district, not too far from Lyndon and Sid's place. The Cutter's place was a dilapidated storage facility of crumbling red brick from back in the days when this city was a major railway center. We opened the door with the peeling paint and stepped into the foyer, pressing the buzzer for entry and making sure we could be seen on the high-dollar closed circuit camera mounted above the inner door, a polished steel-core security door.

"You're late," the voice said flatly over the intercom.

"Sorry," I said. "My fault."

The buzzer sounded and the heavy *clank* of the lock shifting echoed in the chilly anteroom. I pulled the heavy door open and we went inside to the Cutter's office.

The Cutter had been a wealthy doctor once upon a time, with a thriving private practice and loads of volunteer work. A real clean-cut, all-American type with the white picket fence and 2.5 kids and a mortgage. He'd been the poster child for everything wholesome about the medical profession, even down to his one shift a week at the welfare clinic giving free flu shots to little homeless kids. But that was before his wife of sixteen years had introduced him to Ecstasy and cocaine at a party one night.

He'd taken years to go off the rails. I'd never heard the whole story, but apparently it had to do with him showing up for surgery high. He fucked up and paralyzed a ten-year-old boy. He was investigated, lost his license and lost everything in the lawsuit. His wife left him for her dealer and she took everything in the divorce settlement including custody of his children. He wasn't even allowed to see them because of his drug addiction.

To his credit, he'd cleaned up quick and cold turkey - no twelve-step program for this guy. He locked himself in a room and sweated the coke out. I'd always admired his balls for that. But he had a little money squirreled away in an offshore account that the lawyers didn't steal from him and used it to set up this place, a well-stocked and private little ER where people could come for medical attention who didn't exactly want to have records kept of their visit, or too many questions asked about how they got their injury or malady. The Cutter was kind of a legend in the criminal community, and protected like the Holy Grail. Nobody in the city, no drug dealer or thug or gangbanger or white collar swindler would *ever* give up the Cutter to the cops. He was one of our best-kept secrets and every criminal's ace-in-the-hole. His fees were outrageous, and he kept a big heartless brute of an ex-cop named Rutgers to make sure he was paid. But he was *ours*.

He was sitting in an Aeron chair in front of a laptop when we came in. He had hard eyes and thick salt-and-pepper hair cut short, stylish rimless glasses on his roman nose and a no-nonsense set to his jaw. Even now he still wore hospital scrubs and a white lab coat. As if we needed to be reminded that this cat was a for-real doctor.

"I'm not accustomed to being kept waiting," the Cutter said ominously.

"Like I said, Cutter, my fault," I told him. "We need some help."

"What kind of help?"

"There's something weird going on," Ady told him. "Me, Al, Lyndon Sullivan and Sid Trego, we're all acting funny. I know you're no head shrinker, but we wondered if maybe you might know what was going on."

Ady slid a fat envelope across the Cutter's desk. "There's a little in there for the late arrival," he said. "Call it a grief and aggravation charge." He shot me a sinister look.

The Cutter didn't even open the envelope - there were more than enough horror stories about what happened to people who didn't pay the Cutter what they owed him - and slid it into an open desk drawer. He turned in his chair, grabbed a clipboard and pulled a pen from his breast pocket.

"Take a seat," he said, motioning to a leather couch against the brick wall and clicking his pen open. "What kinds of weird things?"

We told him what we'd been noticing over the past days. The Cutter didn't say much - he *never* said much - but interrupted here and there with questions when he had them and spent most of his time with his head down and writing furiously on the clipboard. When we were done with our tale, he finished writing and looked at us coolly.

"And you swear to me that none of you has been doing drugs," he said.

"We swear," Ady said. "And none of us is a drunk, either."

Cutter tapped his pen on the clipboard while he considered. After a moment, he opened his desk drawer and pulled out Ady's envelope, handing it back.

"I have no idea what is going on. It's behavioral, to be certain, but it's completely beyond me. I haven't even read anything like it. And for four people to be showing symptoms like you describe, all with the same onset and presentation... it might be environmental."

"You mean you can't help us?" I asked weakly.

"Fellas, I keep extremely current on mental illness and behavioral disorders, since the majority of my clientele tends to be somewhat emotionally unstable," he told us. "I read a great deal on how to work with nutballs. I've never even heard of anything like this."

"What should we do?" Ady asked.

"I don't know," he said. "See a specialist. Maybe even commit yourselves to an institution for observation. But if you don't realize that the symptoms are present while you're having them, maybe that's a blessing of sorts. Maybe you can just find a way to make the best of this situation."

"Make the best of it?" Ady said in disbelief.

"Yes," the Cutter replied. "Tell me, do any of these symptoms hurt?"

"No," I said.

"Do they make you depressed when you have them? Manic? Anxious?"

"Not when we have them," Ady said. "After, though."

"Then if we're not able to treat the symptoms, then maybe we should treat the after. If the anxiety and panic don't set in until after the symptoms have passed, then maybe it's the after that's the problem. Lyndon and Sidney don't seem to be having this problem at all, it's just you two."

He opened a cabinet under his desk and tossed us four prescription bottles. "Xanax," he told us. "For anxiety and panic attacks. Those are compliments of the house. Take them when you start to feel uptight, they should take the edge off. If you really want a ride, take them with a nice bourbon. You can spend your evening watching your furniture breathe."

"Do you know any specialists that might help us?" I asked, looking at the pill bottles like he'd just tossed me grenades.

"Not that could help you," Cutter said. "I know a shitload of them who would want to write papers about you, put your names in all the medical journals, but nobody who could actually help or make these symptoms go away."

"Shit," I said.

"Relax," Cutter said. "It doesn't sound so bad. To hear you fellas say it, when you're having the symptoms you seem to be very relaxed, almost happy. I don't see why that is a problem. Take the relaxation and happiness when you can get it and then deal with the anxiety when it comes. The pills will help. I think things might level off for you with a little time, or when your surroundings are changed finally, or when Al finds a new job, whatever is setting this off. Maybe you just all need this break a lot worse than you thought you did, and your brains are reacting to the fact that you don't have anything to do for the first time in nearly a year. Living dangerously does things like that to people."

He should know, I thought, tucking the pills into my jacket pocket. "Thanks, Cutter."

"Yeah," Ady echoed. "Thanks."

"You don't sound that enthusiastic," Cutter said. "But then again, I didn't do shit for you, so I wouldn't feel great either."

I stood. "We'll move on." He had the look of being sick of us.

"Look, call me if anything new happens. I don't know anything about this, but maybe I can help with something," he said. For a second, he actually sounded like he cared. He actually sounded a little like a doctor.

"Will do," Ady said. "Thanks again."

He sat back at his computer and dismissed us with a gesture. The doctor was gone, and Cutter was back in his place. I shrugged, feeling a little bit sad, and left behind my brother through the thick steel door.

* * *

"So now what?" my little brother asked me.

"Fucked if I know," I told him. "We've got enough pills to stay fucked up for a while, maybe we should just take his advice and do it."

"Yeah, maybe," Ady said. "But I'd rather figure out what the fuck is going on."

"Me, too," I said. "Look, all of this started when that card shocked us, right? At least that's what we think. Fat Sam has a meth cook with some gonzo chemistry degree. Maybe we could give him that card and he could test it or something, see if somebody put something on it that fucked with our heads or something."

"You think we got poisoned or drugged or some shit?" Ady asked.

"What else do you think could be causing this?" I said. "For all we know we got some huge dose of LSD or something and we've been tripping balls ever since."

"You know how to get in touch with Fat Sam?" Ady asked.

"Sid does," I replied. "He laundered some money for him about eight months ago."

"He's only a couple blocks from here," Ady said. "Let's go see him."

"Lead on," I said.

We weren't in the car for more than five minutes for the three-block drive to Sid and Lyndon's place, but getting out of sight of your car in this neighborhood was not the best idea in the world. We headed up the stairs - newly refurbished, not nearly as rickety as before and with the unmistakable look of new construction, with a polished chrome rail - and knocked the secret knock on the new hardwood door. Loud, thumping club-style beats could be heard dimly through the thick wood.

"Just a second!" a merry voice called from inside.

We waited a moment before the door opened. I almost took a step back, I was so shocked. Lyndon was standing there, sweating and smiling. His skin hung off of him in folds, bagging around his jaw and under his arms like he was an old man. He was wearing some tight Lycra something-or-other that looked for all the world like a leotard and had a towel around his neck. Behind him Sid was moving a blue vinyl mat off the hardwood floor, wearing a similar workout get-up. Some kind of workout video was playing on the big-screen.

"We were just doing Pilates," Lyndon explained. He looked awful. Hell, he even looked *shorter* somehow, but he didn't seem to notice or care. He slugged water from a plastic bottle and stepped out of the way.

The apartment was completely transformed. Everything had the decorator touch, with a very minimal but sexy and polished look, done in chrome and light woods and lots of windows with gauzy linen curtains. Erotic prints hung in tasteful frames on the walls along with very elegant contemporary sculptures on pedestals and shelves, and everything was lit perfectly.

"C'mon in," Sid urged, stuffing the folded workout mat into a storage closet beside the door to the back rooms. "Can I get y'all something?"

"No, thanks," Ady said. "I like the new place."

"Yeah, it's coming along," Lyndon said. "We're still working on the guest bath and the closets, but we're pretty happy with it." He idly rearranged some flowers on the birch glass-top coffee table in front of the white couch. *Flowers?* I thought. *How can they not know something is going on here?*

"What's up?" Sid asked, sitting in an art-deco rocking chair and sipping water. "Y'all never just drop in unless it's important."

"We went to see the Cutter," I said. "About the weird shit that's been going on around here lately."

"What weird shit?" Sid asked.

"All of us acting different. Out of character, like," Ady explained. "We think it all started when we got shocked that time, by that card in the bar."

"It hasn't happened since," Lyndon said. "We've used it twice."

"Still," Ady continued, "we'd like to see if there was anything wrong with it, y'know. I was wondering, Sid, if you could call Fat Sam for us. He's got that chemistry wiz cook working for him, we were wondering if he could take some time and run some tests on the card for us, just to make sure nothing was off."

"I guess so," Sid said. "I haven't heard from Fat Sam in about a year, though. I don't know if he still has that cook or not."

"Nobody lets a good cook go," I said. "If that guy's still alive and on the Outside, he's still with Fat Sam. We can pay."

"You'll have to," Lyndon said. "Fat Sam don't take a dump unless he gets a percentage."

"Make the call," Ady said. "We need to know what's going on."

"Okay," Sid said, standing up to go to his phone book on the computer. He disappeared into the back rooms.

"Y'all sure I can't get you nothing?" Lyndon asked. "Me and Sid were going to go get Thai a little later."

You only eat steak and burgers, you idiot, I thought, but replied, "Nah. We got a lot to do today. Hey, while I'm waiting, can I use your bathroom?"

"Sure," Lyndon said, pointing to a door off the main room. "It's right in there."

I stood and walked into the newly-redone facilities with their adobe tile and chrome fixtures. It looked like something out of *House Beautiful*. Amazing what you could do with a falling down warehouse when price was no object. Lots of contractors were out at bars and nice restaurants right now, toasting the health of Sid and Big Lyndon.

I dropped my pants and sat on the designer commode, lost in thought. I felt a strange pulling, swelling sensation in my balls as I let go with my bladder and looked down in shock, right about the time I asked myself *Why the fuck are you sitting down to piss?*

My balls were swollen huge, about three or four times their natural size. I tried to call out, to scream, to do something, but the breath was caught in my throat. I stood shakily, leaning on the wall for support, and gathered my pants up with one hand before staggering out the bathroom door, sweating from every pore and hyperventilating.

"Al?" Ady asked when he got a look at me.

"Call the Cutter," I gasped right before I passed out.

Ω



SUMMARY: Being part of a ring of identity thieves, one of the gang starts to notice changes about himself and his friends as he remembers the words of one of his victims "...if you take my identity; I will take yours."

IDENTITY THEFT, Part Three

by Valerie Hope

WHEN I FINALLY WOKE UP, a hour or a year could have passed and I wouldn't have known the difference. My whole body ached, and when I tried to move to find a more comfortable position, I found that my wrists and ankles were restrained. I opened my eyes and shut them right back, since a powerful light was shining directly on my face. I groaned and turned my head.

"I don't get it," a voice was saying. A familiar voice. *Cutter's* voice. "I've done this a million times, I never miss. And your brother is young and healthy - I shouldn't be having so hard a time finding a vein."

I dimly felt a stabbing sting in my right wrist. "There, finally," Cutter said. I felt him tugging and putting tape on my wrist, and then the sensation of something cold flowing up my arm, underneath the skin.

"This should relax him a little and let me work."

I managed a frightened croak. "Where are we?"

My brother's concerned face - with its sagging skin just like mine and piercing ice-blue eyes - *Waitaminnit. My brother's eyes are brown. I know they're brown, just like mine* - looking down at me with recognizable anxiety.

"We're back at Cutter's place," he said. "You passed out, remember?"

"My balls," I said.

"They're just swollen," Cutter said from between my legs. I could just barely feel him poking and prodding my private parts, like it was happening through a thick blanket. I'm sure it was the sedatives. If I wasn't doped, I'm sure it would have been much worse.

"Really?" Ady asked.

"Yeah, really. Nothing appears to be wrong except that the entire scrotum appears to be edematous - filled with some kind of fluid," Cutter said. "Al, I'm going to use a needle and try to let some of this fluid out. I'll be very careful."

You better be if you're gonna stick a needle into my balls, I thought. If I wasn't so high on whatever the hell you gave me, I'd be fighting you like a damn wildcat.

"What the - holy shit," Cutter said, and I heard the sound of water spattering on floor tiles. "What the fuck is this?"

Ady looked down at my crotch. "Is that what I think it is?"

"Piss," Cutter said. "His scrotum is full of it."

"He pissed into his own balls?" Ady said.

"Oh, God," I moaned.

"This could be serious," Cutter said. "If his bladder is perforated, then he's going to need surgery right away."

"So go get your shit and get started," I told him.

"I can't do it here, Al," Cutter said. "I'm not set up for invasive surgery. I'd need a sterile facility, a ventilator, an *anesthesiologist* for Chrissakes. This place is just an emergency room."

"I'm not letting no doctor cut on my balls," I said.

"You will if it means you're gonna die without it," Ady said. "I'm not letting my brother kill himself just 'cause he thinks somebody who went to school for a hundred fucking years isn't qualified to touch his precious nut sack."

"Fuck you," I told my brother.

"Like it or not, you're going for surgery. If you don't you'll get peritonitis and die. It takes about six weeks to three months, raging fever, systematic organ shutdown. It's not pretty. Big Ben Hawkins doesn't take that long." Big Ben Hawkins contracted with the Colombians, and was famed far and wide for his abilities in the torture room. Even the Jamaicans with all their voodoo feared him.

"I don't care if Cutter has to knock your ass out and I have to carry you, you're going," Ady said.

"I'm giving you some antibiotics" - this time it was a burning sensation up my arm under the skin - "and another dose of sedative. Go right away."

I dimly felt them unlocking the restraints on my wrists and ankles. Whatever Cutter gave me was some primo shit, I could actually feel myself smiling. They handed me my clothes and helped me out of the hospital gown, helped me dress and half-dragged, half-carried me back into the front room, where Cutter's office was. Lyndon and Sid were there, sitting together. They jumped back from each other when the door opened.

"Were you two fuckers *holding hands*?" I heard Ady ask. I was too fucked up to raise my head, all I had was a blurry view of the Tuscan tile on the floor.

"What's up, what's wrong with Al?" Lyndon asked, ignoring Ady.

"Something with his bladder. It's leaking into him or something. Cutter says we have to get him to a hospital right away."

"My car's right out front," Sid said. "Put him in the back seat." Sid dropped a fat envelope onto Cutter's desk - the ex-doctor nodded grimly in receipt - and helped me along, opening the doors.

"Hang in there, kid," Lyndon said as he slid a shoulder under one of my arms and took my weight from Cutter. "We'll get you fixed up."

"Thanks, Cutter," Ady said.

"No problem," the gruff man said. "And Ady, you two were right. Something very fucking weird is going on."

* * *

I had just managed to sit up between Ady and Lyndon when I heard a strange ringing in my ears. I cocked my head to one side, like a puppy, and I felt the skin on my face slide across my nose and partially cover one eye. It felt as though it could slide off.

"Do y'all hear that?" I asked.

"Yeah," Lyndon said. "It's..."

"...pretty," Sid said from the driver's seat.

"Where's it coming from?" Ady asked.

Sid looked around, poking through the console and the glove compartment. Finally he looked into the inside pocket of his suit and pulled out his wallet. The sound was much louder and more insistent when he drew it out, louder still when he opened it. A soft golden light spread through the car and he withdrew a glowing credit card that emanated a chiming, musical high-pitched song.

"It's this card," Sid told us. "The one that shocked us."

"Why's it glowing?" Lyndon asked. None of us could look away from it.

"We have to go," Ady said. "We have to get my brother to the hospital."

"I know," Sid said, transfixed and unable to tear his eyes from the glow.

"We have to go now," Ady insisted.

"No we don't," I said. "As a matter of fact, I think I have a better idea."

* * *

"See ya, bye!" Lyndon called from the passenger seat of the Lincoln - I was so glad Sid had announced that he was getting rid of his huge-ass gas guzzling pimp car on the ride home in favor of something cuter and more sporty - as it pulled away from the curb. I stood there, feeling better than I had in years, draped in sacks and boxes from our non-stop eight hour shopping excursion. We'd dropped Ady off earlier with a similar amount. And even taking our stuff out of the car didn't make a dent in the pile that Lyndon and Sid were taking back to their place. I took me three trips to get all the shit I bought off the curb and into my apartment.

The movers had come in while I was out, and delivered my new cream-and-pink striped couch and matching chairs, my new queen-size bed with the pretty brass head- and footboards, my new dressing table and chest of drawers in dark walnut, my new dining table with the four matching chairs in maple, and all my new paintings for the walls.

I sorted my bags into sections and began unloading them in as organized a fashion as I was able. First was the kitchen, with my new dishes and flatware, my new glassware and all the cool little kitchen gadgets we'd found at Crate & Barrel. The stolen platinum card we'd used for all the purchases had stopped glowing and humming, but we kept it busy nonetheless. I'd lost

count, but I know the four of us easily spent more than sixty thousand dollars out shopping. It had been a fucking blast.

Next was my new stereo which went on the cute little Ikea shelf by the door. I had a nice matching CD rack to go with it and unloaded it with all my purchases from Sam Goody. Normally I'd stuck to the indie stores and buying CDs at club shows, but I'd just been in the mood for mainstream when I'd gone into the record store this time. I walked out with tons of stuff I never really listened to before but somehow just knew I'd adore, like Madonna and Britney and Christina and Pussycat Dolls and Gwen Stefani. I organized them alphabetically, spending almost too much time taking them meticulously out of the cellophane wrappers, taking off the stickers which sealed them shut and filing them in the CD case. It had easily contained my collection of indie labels before with its 120 disk capacity. Now it was nearly overflowing. We'd bought a *lot* of music.

By the time I was done, I was exhausted but in a very good way. I was sweaty and sore, sipping water from a plastic bottle, sitting on the floor. I'd put together all of my new shelves and had my new books arranged. I don't know what had come over me at the bookstore. Normally I didn't like to read anything more than *Hustler* and now I had three rows. The subjects were strange though - books on makeup and cosmetics, hairstyling and interior decoration and a bunch of self-help books mostly centering on personal happiness and satisfaction in the sex life. I'd added a bunch of pretty sculptures that looked cute with everything else and a good assortment of DVDs. Most of them were workout-related but there were some fun titles like *Bring it On* and *Dodgeball*. I'd even felt this strange elation and pull towards movies that I'd never even seen, but when I saw them for sale I knew I had to have them, like *Kissing Jessica Stein* and *When Harry Met Sally* and a few others.

I'd set up all my new furniture and arranged all my new purchases on the shelves and in the Rubbermaid storage bins I'd bought, but now I found that I needed more stuff to fill all the storage space I'd created - particularly in the bathroom and the closet. I had much more shelf space than I had crap to put on it. I resolved to take care of that tomorrow, right after I went to the dealership and spent the stolen car loan on a brand-new Nissan 350Z convertible. I'd shopped around for lots of Japanese import sports cars and this was the one I looked far and away the hottest in. It had been a blast, out shopping with Ady and Lyndon and Sid, but tomorrow I was also looking forward to going out by myself to fill up all the space in my shoe organizer and giant dresser and vanity.

I stepped into the bathroom and turned on the light. I still had to pee out the small hole that Cutter had poked into my scrotum, so there was no way I could stand up. I sat down on the cold seat, ignoring the way the skin on my thighs sagged around the edge and seemed to pool around my waist and ankles. I loved the hot pink shower curtain and matching towels I'd found while out shopping and was smiling happily to myself when I heard the phone ringing.

I wiped up the overflow from the puncture with a scrap of toilet paper and rushed into the other room, my skin sliding back and forth underneath my feet as I rushed, like I was about to step right out of the skin. I just barely got the phone before the answering machine would have picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Al, it's Lyndon," the voice said. I almost didn't recognize it. Without the face to put it with, I'd remembered Lyndon's voice as deep and growly, like gravel poured into a bucket.

"What's up, kid?" I asked, feeling uncharacteristically happy.

"Nada," he said. "Listen, I don't know why I called. I just felt like I had to."

"Huh?"

"I'm serious. I just sat down and dialed your number but I didn't have anything to talk to you about," he said. "It's kinda weird. I don't understand."

"Well, did you have a question or something?"

"No, I just wanted... I guess, I just wanted to talk to you. About anything, or nothing, or something. It just seemed really important that I talk to you on the phone."

"And there's no reason why," I asked again.

"Not anything that isn't stupid," he confessed.

"Well, do you have a reason that *is* stupid?" I asked, a little sarcastically.

"Yeah," he said. "It's 'cause you're my friend, and I had a really good time out with you today and I feel like we're even better friends now and I wanted to call you and just talk, like we were doing in the mall and in the car. Stupid, right?"

Why were my eyes stinging? I thought as I said, "Well, I dunno... when you said it, it didn't sound stupid at all. It sounded..."

"Sounded what?" he asked.

"It sounded really really sweet," I said. "I mean *really*. It made me feel all funny in my chest. Like it was hard to breathe."

"You want me to call Cutter?" he asked.

I chuckled. "No," I explained. "Not like that. Like, it felt good but kinda hurt at the same time. I think I really liked it."

"I know what you mean," he said. "I felt that way when you said I looked cute in that green sweater today."

Something crazy occurred to me and I didn't stop to think about it. I just said, "Hey, Lyndon, do you want to come over?"

"What, you mean right now?" he asked. "It's late."

"I know," I said, "but it seems silly to talk on the phone. We don't live that far apart, and I can make us some coffee or something and we can talk here."

Long pause. "Okay, that sounds good. I'll get something to eat on the way over."

"Something light," I said. "After that late lunch I feel like a heifer."

"Oh my God, me too," Lyndon laughed. "What were we thinking?"

"I know, right? If we keep eating like that, we're all going to be some fat-assed bitches if we're not careful. I'm so gonna have to hit the Bowflex again in the morning and work some of it off."

"Yeah I know," Lyndon said. "Hey, I'll be there in a bit, okay?"

"Okay, be careful," I said. "And Lyndon?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm really glad we're doing this," I said.

"I am too," he replied.

"I really like you. I'm glad we're turning into better friends," I told him.

He sniffed. *Was he crying?* After a long pause, he said, "I just felt that 'hurt to breathe' thing you were talking about."

"Did you like it?" I asked.

"I'll tell you when I get there," he told me.

* * *

My heart half-jumped out of my chest when I heard the timid-sounding knock at my door. I crossed the living area in three big strides and threw the deadbolts, opening the door. Lyndon was there, wearing a denim jacket that looked about seven sizes too big for him and jeans that were bagging around his ankles. I noticed his belt was notched to the last notch and he was still pulling up his pants. He was holding a McDonald's bag and in his sock feet.

I took the bag and ushered him in.

"Chicken salads," he told me.

"Lyndon, why aren't you wearing shoes? You must be freezing!" I said.

He came in. "None of my shoes fit anymore," he said. "I had to give them all away. That's okay, I can get some new ones tomorrow."

"Today is tomorrow," I said, looking at my watch. It was difficult, since it kept sliding up my arm. If it wasn't for the baggy skin, I'm pretty sure I could get it over my elbow without discomfort, but I was still using the same notch that I'd been using for my entire adult life.

I grabbed plates and bottled water, served up the salads and put them on my new dining table with forks and napkins. This, from a guy who ate Corn Flakes out of the box every morning and chewed them with milk to get that cereal taste. I also lit the two burgundy-colored candles in the silver candlesticks on the table and sat Lyndon down. For some reason I couldn't entirely define, I gave his shoulders a firm squeeze while I was behind him. He laid his stubbly, lax-skinned cheek against the back of my hand and I felt a strange warm-and-cold-at-the-same-time thrill run up my arm, up the back of my neck and into my scalp. I liked it.

We ate and talked about everything and nothing. I laughed more with him in the hours that passed than I'd laughed, I think, in the last four years. We discussed how excited we were about the changes taking place in our lives and how they didn't freak us out at all any more. We speculated on the future, and the causes of the glowing humming credit card that didn't seem to alarm us at all, what we were planning on doing with the rest of our money,

everything - from television and music and movies to politics and religion and society. Nothing was taboo, and I was surprised at how similarly we viewed the world around us.

But the end result was that I felt closer and closer to him as the night progressed and after a short while I realized that I couldn't get close enough. I trusted him, I respected him and I wanted to *give* to him, something I'd never experienced before in my entire life. I wanted him closer to me, which was another unique emotion.

I hadn't even noticed that we'd been holding hands and running our fingertips up and down the sensitive skin on the insides of each other's forearms. And we were leaning close, very close. Too close to back away. All we could do - all that it made any sense at all to do - was lean in.

I paused, a scant millimeter from his sagging lips. "Does this mean we're gay?" I asked in a breathless whisper.

"I think it does," he told me.

So I'm gay, I thought as I leaned in and pressed my lips to his. *This doesn't seem so bad.*

* * *

Lyndon woke up before I did and made coffee while I was still moaning from the effort of waking up. He brought me a cup and a sweet, tender kiss. Last night had been amazing, but frustrating. Neither of us had been able to get an erection, but strangely enough neither of us had been all that bothered by it. But I have to admit it would have been nice to get him hard, there was this strange new part of me that desperately wanted to feel him inside my body, hard and insistent, pounding away at me. I couldn't get over how horny I felt for him and how much I wanted him to do whatever he wanted with me. It had been a very new, very odd feeling, and not even this sense of peace I'd developed that was keeping me from freaking out by all this newness could really numb all the anxiety I was feeling around these new emotions. I'd crept out of bed late to take some of the Xanax that Cutter had given me, just to keep myself from hyperventilating and get some sleep. But even though I felt like I was going completely crazy I still made a beeline back to bed to curl up in Lyndon's arms. I hadn't wanted to leave them in the first place.

At some point during our talk last night I'd mentioned my desire to go out and go shopping and somehow, I'm not sure how, we'd agreed to go together. I guess that perverted my reasons for going in the first place but I didn't want Lyndon to go far from me today. The attachment I was feeling was very real and very insistent. Not like it had ever been before, where I couldn't get far enough away from the women I'd been with after I finally hooked up. Could I actually be falling in love?

I sipped my coffee and tried not to think about it, just to feel it and enjoy what I was feeling. I held his hand while we sat on the bed and chatted about nothing.

We left for the mall about an hour later after taking a quick shower together - Lyndon raved about my new hot pink-and-white bathroom - and brushing our teeth. Apparently my new whitening toothpaste was really working, my teeth were dazzlingly white and they even appeared to be straighter, even the crooked one on the bottom row I'd always had. I was very happy about this for a reason I couldn't really understand, but it was enough to make me flash

a big Osmond Family smile at everyone I passed. And it made me feel startlingly good to smile like that, and good when I got smiles in return.

The shopping was not what I expected it would be. Normally, I didn't go shopping - I went *buying*. I had a clear picture of what I wanted already before I ever got to the retail stores and didn't spend a lot of time looking around, I went right to what I wanted and then was on my way. Not today. Lyndon and I walked around, browsing in windows and pawing through clothing racks with no idea of what we wanted.

And for some reason things just seemed to pop into my head. Sizes, cuts, colors, what would look good on me and what wouldn't. I never had to try anything on, I just automatically *knew* what was going to fit me and how it was going to fit me.

Maybe it was the strange sense of calm or maybe it was the Xanax, I'll never be sure, but *what* I was buying didn't seem to be bothering me. Oddly enough, it didn't seem to be bothering anyone else either. I thought the sight of a baggy-skinned man in clothes far too big for him buying lacy bra and panty sets at Victoria's Secret would at least get me some funny looks from the salesgirl working the register. But she just smiled and thanked me.

Lyndon and I started there buying a ton of underwear, from cute to naughty to comfortable, everything from barely-there thongs to cotton jog-bras. Next it was on to DSW shoe warehouse where we stocked up on everything. I felt a very palpable kinship with the shoe store. I *loved* being there and didn't want to leave. I walked out with two dozen pairs of shoes - I liked that money was no object - and aside from the platform flip-flops and two pairs of white athletic shoes, every single pair had a minimum of a two-inch heel, most in the three- to four-inch range.

From there it was off to the stores. Rave, Wet Seal, Charlotte Russe, Foley's, Dillard's... no store's racks were safe from Lyndon and me. We had to go back to the car twice to unload purchases since the load got too heavy to carry. Jeans, tops, dresses, skirts, jackets and coats, hosiery. We bought about five purses apiece, as well, to carry shit around in. I'd never thought how handy a purse was until I dumped all of my stuff into one of my new ones and slung it under my arm as we walked. Nobody gave me a single weird look with my pink satin purse under my sagging arm. I was kicking myself for not buying one sooner - with your stuff under your arm it freed up two hands to carry loot and to dig through clearance racks.

From there it was Claire's and the Icing for everyday jewelry - earrings and finger rings and necklaces and bracelets in all shapes and sizes. Then we splurged at the Heltzmann's on the diamonds, for our "special occasion" jewelry. Lyndon bought me a little diamond pendant in the shape of a heart and I couldn't stop grinning. He was so sweet to me. I was determined to find something like that for him while we were there.

We ate a light lunch of chicken wraps at the food court and were a little naughty at the Cinn-a-Bon afterwards before heading down to the stores we hadn't visited yet. I got a new cell-phone, an adorable pink one with rhinestones and a camera, and I took a cute picture of me and Lyndon together cheek-to-cheek. We poked our noses in everywhere - even the bridal shop for a little while even though we were both giggling and nervous. We even visited Frederick's of Hollywood for some more naughty stuff and lingerie. Stuff I couldn't wait to see Lyndon in. When he told me he couldn't wait to see me in the corset I'd bought, I got a naughty thrill like an electric charge up my back.

We left the mall late and made a final stop at CVS before calling it quits. Here we stocked up on essentials - makeup and applicators, moisturizers and skin care, shampoo and conditioner and anti-frizz gel, styling mousse and gel and hairspray. I bought a high-power hair dryer, two curling irons, a flat iron and a set of hot rollers just like Lyndon's. Nail care and polish and emery boards, hair bands and scrunchies and cute little barrettes and clips. I also stocked up on vitamins and got some Midol and tampons as well just to have some on hand "in case," even though I'd never thought in terms of needing those in case of any event. But Lyndon thought it was a great idea and bought some as well. He finished the excursion by buying a carton of Virginia Slims Ultra Lights, which struck me as a departure. He'd smoked Camels for as long as I'd known him and I remembered hearing him say he'd never switch brands. I guess he'd finally changed his mind.

We spent thousands again, and had a wonderful time. I couldn't remember ever having a better afternoon. Lyndon and I had held hands as we walked, we hugged each other constantly... it was wonderful. I didn't want it to end, but as I dropped him at his apartment in my new white Nissan with a big kiss and a promise to call - one that I actually intended to keep - I headed for home to put all my new purchases away.

My overflowing closet made me far happier than I'd ever expected to be, but there was still plenty of room from the huge storage system I'd bought the other day. It gave me a sweet glow inside my belly to know there was plenty more room. I was arranging my makeup on my vanity when it struck me just how weird everything was. This wasn't anything I'd ever wanted or needed, why was it making me so happy? Why was I singing and humming to myself and doing little dances around the room every time I thought about Lyndon, the guy who broke people's bones for a living? Why was I singing and humming Gwen Stefani lyrics when I'd never in my life known a single word from any one of her songs?

I dumped my purse out on my dining room table. Everything looked foreign, different and new. Only my old fountain pen and the rubber-banded bundle of stolen credit cards were left, buried beneath the pile of gum, nail polish, lipstick, hair accessories, cell phone and stuff that dumped out. I sorted through it, looking for any vestige of my old life anywhere. Even just a driver's license with a picture of me before the change. But there wasn't. It had gotten lost, under the punch-out card from my nail salon, my hairdresser's business card and my membership to the tanning salon. None of which I ever remembered wanting but I clearly remembered purchasing.

I wasn't an idiot. I knew what was happening. Men didn't buy tampons for themselves, but I did. Because I was worried I would need them soon. I knew exactly what was going on. What I didn't know was *how* and why I wasn't completely freaked out about it.

I looked over at the wall shelf I'd installed. I'd packed it with scented candles and picture frames. All of the dozen frames were empty. Suddenly I knew what I was going to fill them with.

Pictures of my new friends. Lyndon. Ady and Sid. Jenny, Natasha and Renée, the new friends I'd met at the club that night. *New friends for a new life.*

I walked to the little white-board I'd hung in my kitchen and grabbed a marker and wrote "What the hell is happening?" in big letters across it. It took a moment for me to see that my writing

was different - rounded, circular and bubbly. I misspelled "happening" and dotted my *i*'s with little hearts.

Angrily, I scrubbed my offensive handwriting away. I didn't even know myself any more.

"I'm not going to steal your identity," I told her reassuringly.

"That's good," she said. "Cause if you did, I'd steal yours right back."

And I knew.

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I stared at myself in the mirror, looking for anything recognizable in my face. It hung off of my skull in folds, looking sepulchral and horrifying, like I was decaying. It sagged off of me everywhere, down my belly and under my arms. My fingertips were flat, like there were no bones in them, like I was wearing gloves that were too long for me. Idly, I gathered up the loose skin in the space where my elbow bent and pulled. It tented out a good four inches. I pulled harder, to see if I could get it to smooth out, so I could get one last look at the smooth, muscular arm I'd had before all this started.

The skin tore.

There was no pain and no blood, just a dry ripping sound. I stared at the laceration in disbelief and poked it with my fingers. Curious, I painlessly wormed two fingers into the cut and it widened. Closing my eyes, I pulled and heard a great tearing sound, like someone ripping fabric. I felt something slipping away. Both desperate to look and not wanting to see, I opened my eyes.

The skin of my arm was torn loose and flopping against my side. Inside the sagging skin was a long, lissome arm, almost hairless and tanned a rich, golden amber. The skin was smooth and unblemished, with a thin wrist that disappeared into the glove of my old hand. I reached up and slid it off, revealing a thin-fingered hand with a narrow palm and long, slender fingers with healthy, well-kept nails, expressive at the end of a delicate, fine-boned wrist. The skin of my hand fell to the floor with a wet *flop*.

I grabbed my other hand with my new one and pulled. The skin came away like a long opera glove, tearing at my elbow and stripping away in one piece. An arm identical to the other one now poked out from my old, torn skin. As the chilly air of the bathroom hit my new flesh it goose-pebbled.

Curious, I grabbed my new skin and pinched hard to see if it would tear away like my old. I jumped in pain, muttering "Ouch!" and jerking my wrist away from the offending fingers. This new skin seemed more sensitive somehow. I resolved to quit pinching myself, with the knowledge somehow that I bruised easily popping into my head.

I slid my feet against the bath mat, like trying to take off a pair of socks without using my hands, until the skin tore around my knees and my lower leg slid away. I kicked and stepped until my shapely, curvaceous shaved calf was exposed, also tanned and smooth, with a slender ankle and delicate, cute feet that would easily fit the ladies' size 7 shoes I'd bought in the day's spree.

Using my nails, I pinched and tore at the skin over my sternum - the skin that felt so tight and restrictive - and finally had to use my new cuticle scissors to start a hole which I widened with

my fingers until the tear ran from under my throat to below my navel. Taking a deep breath, I pushed my fingers into the tear and pulled away, like I was taking off a vest.

The chest revealed was narrow and slender, with ribs showing but not prominent, and capped by two beautiful, perfect and spherical 36D breasts with proud pink nipples that stiffened immediately in the chill, surrounded by silver-dollar sized areolae of a similar rosy pink. There were two triangles of pale, smooth flesh around my nipples over the curves of my generous breasts, telling me that I tanned in a bikini top. I delicately ran the end of a finger across one of my stiff nipples and an electric wave of thrilling pleasure shot through my body.

I forced the skin down around my hips, where it was tight again. My belly was as flat as a plank, with subtle curves of abdominal muscle - the Bowflex again - and a cute little poochy swell below my navel. I noticed a hole in the smooth, tanned skin above the bellybutton, and knew immediately where the navel ring, the rhinestone frog I'd purchased at Claire's today, was meant to go. Taking it from the bathroom shelf where I'd put it, I inserted it upwards through the hole and screwed on the top. The frog dangled on the end of a tiny little chain, tickling me a little. The rhinestones glittered perfectly against my tan, setting it off amazingly and drawing attention to the flat perfection of my belly. All those sit-ups and crunches - and I remembered every one of them, even though I knew I'd never actually done them - were *going* to get noticed.

Pushing downwards, I did a little side-to-side shimmy to work the skin over my wide, curvy hips. It got stuck just as I saw the tan line of my bikini bottom high on my hip. I turned around. I guess I tanned in a thong, too.

Sighing, wishing I hadn't needed to tear any more, I grabbed my lip, flopping dick in one hand and pulled upwards, hard. The whole organ, scrotum included, tore away and tore up to my navel. I pitched my old organ - the symbol of my former gender, the source of my power, I thought - on the pile of skin which was growing on my bathroom floor. I should have been terrified, or nauseated, but I wasn't. My dick just didn't seem very important any more. I pulled away the skin around my hips like a sarong, exposing my wide, shapely hips and bubble butt - thousands of hours on a Stairmaster for that - and the sweet little tuck-in of my vagina, nestled in the waxed strip of downy auburn that lay completely inside the triangle of pale flesh where the bikini bottom had protected me from tanning. A gentle flick with my finger shot tendrils of pure hot pleasure up my spine and I gasped. There was definitely a clitoris in there, and it was functioning perfectly. My thighs were hard and smooth, without a trace of cellulite on them - more hard work that I remembered in the gym, but didn't actually do - and were a bit shorter than my shins, which made me look very leggy, like a runway model. The legs were strong and slender, *great* movie-star legs, shaved meticulously and moisturized. I knew that tanning could dry out my skin and I was completely obsessive about moisturizing, because damned if I was going to lose my tan.

I looked up at last, and gazed at myself in the mirror. Grabbing my scalp, I yanked straight up and pulled, revealing my face as it slid off like a Halloween mask. A tumble of dirty blonde hair spilled out, cascading softly down my slender back and over my narrow shoulders to frame a slender, heart-shaped face with high cheekbones and a delicate face. Over-large, ice-blue eyes with long lashes dominated the face, giving me an innocent, little-girl look under high, arched eyebrows the same color as my hair. A slender, aquiline nose with an adorable little button on the end and a small, pouty mouth with full, bee-stung lips lay below. That pouty

mouth spread into the toothy, open smile that I'd been so quick to show at the mall, making me glow and my eyes twinkle and sinking two very cute dimples in my cheeks.

I was *gorgeous*. Not just cute - although I could pull off cute - but cover-of-the-magazine beautiful, one of those faces you could just stare at for hours, memorizing all the curves and shades. My skin was perfect, not a single blemish or freckle, and it glowed healthily back at me.

I tied my hair into two cute schoolgirl pigtails and bound them up with pink terry-cloth bands. A little glitter pink lip-gloss - I couldn't go out without *some* makeup, that much I was completely sure of - and I slid into a pair of cutoff denim Daisy Dukes that showed off my legs and ass perfectly, a little ribbed pink tank-top that left my flat belly bare with "Princess" in rhinestones across the tits, some big silver hoop earrings that brushed the tops of my shoulders, and I gathered up my trash. I had one trash bag full of boxes and bags and tags ripped off of new clothing, and another full of dry, crumbling skin from an old thief who wasn't around anymore. I slid into my pink platform flip-flops and walked them to the dumpster downstairs, humming Britney Spears and shaking my ass to make all the groundskeepers stare and drool. I couldn't keep that signature, wide toothy smile off of my face.

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I took the morning to get my nails done - acrylic extensions, square cut with solar tips to give me the French manicure I loved so well - and my hair lightened to the point where it almost looked bleached. I didn't want to bleach because it wrecked my hair and dried it out, and I wanted that shine and bounce but I wanted it bombshell blonde to get me noticed. My hairdresser - Jenny, of course, who else would work me in on such short notice and who else did I want to spend that money on? - worked wonders, taking me up several shades and pulling the brassy yellow out to make me a pale, vanilla blonde. A quick session in the tanning bed - every other day to keep the look I loved so much - and I was off to lunch with my friends.

We met at a chic little downtown café shortly after noon, hugging and kissing before sitting down at an outdoor table for salads and white wine. Lyndon played "footie" with me under the table, running his - her - sandaled toe up the inside of my calf and thigh and making me wet as a spring morning. I was going to soak through my denim short-shorts at this rate and I know my nipples were poking through the skin-tight pink halter I'd chosen. I wound a strand of blonde hair around my finger and tried not to blush.

My brother - my sister - seemed to know exactly what was going on and gave me one of those sweet, I-know-your-secret smiles that we'd shared together since we were little boys - little girls. She had my same ice-blue eyes, but her hair was dark with reddish highlights and glowed in the afternoon sun. We could have been twins except for the hair, her skin was pale, and she didn't have dimples when she smiled. Her tits were bigger than mine by a little bit and she was about an inch shorter than my five foot seven, but she made up for it with the four-inch heels she was wearing.

Sid was talking animatedly with big gestures about something he - she - had seen on the drive over. I wasn't listening, I could only look at that slightly swarthy skin and the pouty, kissable lips that were talking. She had dark curly hair that spilled from her scalp and down her back, so thick and full and shiny that it was wider than her shoulders. She'd been the flattest of us until she got her tits done to a perfect 36D like mine - we'd even gone to the same doctor for the operation about three months apart. Her eyes were dark - almost black - and twinkled

merrily when she smiled. She had the most perfect, smoothest and softest skin I'd ever seen and her eyelashes made me jealous - they brushed her cheeks when she blinked and she never had to wear falsies like I did.

But my eyes never strayed too long from my lover - my girlfriend - Lyndon. Perfect, pale "Nicole Kidman" skin with huge, intense dark brown eyes. Her hair and eyebrows were a shocking strawberry blonde, this amazing pale red that I somehow knew also grew in a little strip between her sweet, smooth thighs. She never took her eyes fully off of me. I was so in love with her, I didn't even know how to act. It was all I could do to keep from jumping her bones right there on the table in front of everybody. Not that my bitches would care much, but we might get asked to leave. Or we might get a cult following, you could never tell.

"Here are the final documents," Sid said. "Social Security, drivers' license, birth certificates, credit cards, everything we need."

She passed them out to us in envelopes. I opened mine and pulled out the IDs Sid had made for us. From Alistair Forbes Hopkins to Alison Fiona Hopkins. Alison. I liked it. I told everyone to call me Ali and they agreed.

Ady, who had always shortened his name from Adrian, now asked that we stop shortening her name and call her Adrienne from now on. Adrienne Michelle Hopkins had replaced Adrian Michael Hopkins without a seam.

Lyndon Ellis Sullivan looked down at her ID and smiled. "Lyndsey Elizabeth Sullivan," he said. "D'you like it, baby?"

"I love it, Lyndsey," I told him.

"And for me, Sydnee Catherine Trego," Sydnee announced. "That should be the last of it. These will be our new permanent identities unless somebody wants something different."

"These are good," Adrienne announced.

"Yeah," I seconded.

"Okay, we can start making more money after Ali gets a new job," Sydnee said.

"I got one," I said. "I start work at Hooters tomorrow."

"I can't wait to see you in your little uniform," Adrienne said. "It should take, what - about three weeks to start stealing cards again?"

"Give or take," Sydnee said. "In the meantime, I can get by on what the website makes." Sydnee made a great deal of money on her webcam, fucking random guys she met at clubs and letting people log in to watch. She was somewhat of a porn star out in cyberspace, and she had the technical knowhow to not need a programmer.

"And I've got my job," Lyndsey said. She was one of the most successful strippers where she headlined at The Blue Parrot. I went to see her dance all the time.

"And I'll be okay once football season starts," Adrienne said. She'd been a cheerleader for the local pro football team for three years.

"Great," Sydnee said. "Sounds like we're all set."

I squeezed Lyndsey's hand. "You bet we are."

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