



Mama Kiss It, Make It Better

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COLD DIDN'T BEGIN TO DESCRIBE the leaden, aching feeling running along my bones. This was the worst time of the year, early January, when snow and sleet lashed by vicious winds tore through the threadbare layers I wore to try to keep myself from freezing. Spring and autumn weren't too bad, all things considered, and summer had its moments, but the long winters levied a merciless toll on the homeless. The other months, a guy down on his luck like myself could try to get a little bit ahead. But when the skies turned grey and the wind began its howling onslaught, life became just a simple fight for survival.

I buried my hands in my pockets and headed up Market Street, hoping that the early Christmas shoppers might take a little pity and spare a handout. Honestly, I'd take hot coffee over spare change at this point – the mercury started low and now dropped fast – but the Salvation Army

didn't open its doors for another hour and a half. I just needed to find myself a couple bucks and a place out of the wind until then.

I scanned the pedestrian traffic along the sidewalk, old instincts kicking in from my days in the Marine Corps. I still calculated fields of fire and looked for decent cover, even with my time in Afghanistan long over. The thought made me chuckle; I was no unstoppable killing machine, just a lowly rifleman, but the Corps hardwired the training into my brain. Some part of me would be a Marine forever, I suspected, even though the Corps couldn't get rid of me fast enough when they found out my dirty little secret.

My pocketed hand closed around something hard and sharp-edged. That familiar mixture of elation and self-loathing washed through me like the numbing cold. It was something simple, found in the garbage a few days ago. Just a little rhinestone ring, in the shape of Hello Kitty, with a stretchy finger loop which would fit my large hands. I slipped my index finger through the loop and felt at peace. How hard would the average passerby laugh at me, I wondered, if they knew that the wiry, hard-eyed beggar in his threadbare clothes and his soldierly manner got so much satisfaction from feeling something pink and sparkly and altogether *girly* on his finger?

I guess I'd always known, to be honest. Sure, I played football just like the other boys, I fought and ran and jumped and came home muddy with skinned knees. But while the other boys boasted of being just like this famous football player, I secretly dreamed of being a cheerleader. Huge, toothy smile and perfect skin and hair, leaping and pirouetting with my pom-poms, being that wonderful quintessence of wholesome athletic beauty. I ached for long, thick eyelashes and manicured nails, the smell of perfume and hairspray clinging to me and the perpetual cute outfit to show me off.

I ran from it my whole life. Tried not to admit it. Sneaked out the various articles of women's clothing I stole or found in my bi-monthly purges, thinking *that's it, it's out of my system, I don't have to wear high heels any more, I can just be normal now*. But it never lasted. I would find myself in a department store with my mom for some reason and the pinkest, frilliest thing I could get my hands on would be down the back of my blue jeans in an instant.

My life became typical overcompensation. I played football, took taekwondo, I fought anything that slowed down long enough to let me. But always I found myself slipping on a pair of panties in the dead of night, hating myself for my weakness and wondering why I couldn't just be like the other boys. I joined up right out of high school, hoping the Corps would finally stomp these urges out of me. During basic, I didn't have enough time or energy to think about it. I thought I was "cured." I never even heard the word *transgender* at that time of my life. I figured I could just spend the rest of my life in BDUs and I could finally turn some kind of metaphorical corner.

Panties and camisoles fit just fine under BDUs, it turned out.

The same BDUs that get cut off of you in a field hospital when you take a 7.62mm round in your thigh on a combat patrol. The Corps didn't waste time – it was the waning days of "don't ask, don't tell" and now my secret was out. I got an honorable discharge and a purple heart to stave off the potential lawsuit I could bring, a wounded "war hero" drummed out because of discrimination, and the President shaking his fists at the military over their hidebound policies.

I came home, but home didn't last long. Once Dad found out about why I got dismissed from the Corps, he threw me out. Said his house would never be home to a freak. I packed my meager belongings in a duffle bag and a few milk crates, slid into my car, and drove away from my stone-faced father and crying mother. Lack of marketable skills and a total lack of the basics of managing money claimed my apartment, my car and my few valuable possessions. I couldn't hold down a job on the rare occasions I actually found one. It seemed like destiny to wind up on the streets.



Lack of marketable skills and a total lack of the basics of managing money claimed my apartment, my car and my few valuable possessions.

I ducked into an alley I knew, just to take a break from the biting wind. I stamped my feet and blew warm air into my hands until they stung, taking refuge behind a makeshift wall of recycling bins. I picked out the huddled forms of some people I knew and moved closer. One old junkie, a shambling wreck of a man named Rodney, coughed up a thick gob of nasty-smelling phlegm into a storm drain and scooted over to make some room. A couple cans of Sterno, pilfered from the trash of a nearby catering company, formed a little island of blessed warmth.

“Thanks, man,” I grunted to Rodney.

“Nice ring,” he said, nodding towards my Hello Kitty trinket. I'd forgotten to take it off.

“It ain't worth nothing,” an older woman with a thick scarf and gin-blossomed nose barked.

I shrugged, trying to play it off. “I found it. I just liked the way it looked. Maybe somebody will give me something for it, you never know.”

A huddled mass of rags and third-hand coats stirred. A thick woolen scarf shot through with moth-holes parted to reveal the face of Freddy Mac, a wildly schizophrenic ex-barber local to Market Street. He high-fived me, the way he high-fived everyone, and offered me a yellow-toothed smile.

"Hey, Greg," he rasped. "Haven't seen you around in a while."

"Yeah," I said. "Been looking for work, hanging out around 16th and 17th Streets."

"Any luck?" Rodney asked.

"Couple day jobs, didn't pay shit," I said. "Lots of rich folks though, heading to that new bar up there. Made some pretty decent cash for a while, but it's all dried up now that the weather's shit."

A chorus of croaking agreement traveled around the circle.

"Hey, man, you still clean?" Freddy Mac asked me.

I chuckled. "You know I am. How the fuck am I gonna afford drugs?"

"You could suck dick for them like Rodney," the nameless woman laughed.

"Fuck you, Tammy," Rodney hissed back.

"Why d'you ask?" I said, bringing the conversation back to Freddy Mac's question.

"You can go give blood," Freddy Mac told me.

"No shit?" I asked.

"Yeah," he answered. "Blood center up on Williams Avenue. Clean blood, they give you something to eat and fifty dollars. I can't go on a count of my hepatitis."

"That's enough to get us a room for the night," I said. "Out of this fucking cold."

"Us?" Tammy asked.

"I wouldn't leave y'all out here, if that's what you're asking," I replied. "I can't feed you, but at least it'll be warm, right? I'll head up there and get paid. Meet y'all back here in a couple hours. We can maybe get a hot meal at the Lutheran mission and then go get us a room for the night."

"Greg, you a good dude," Rodney said.

"I try," I said, levering myself up and steeling my nerves for re-entry into the cold.

* * * * *

I sat awake in the garish caustic light of the television in a darkened room. Around me, in the gloom, my friends snored and farted insensibly. But something in me – maybe my training, maybe my instincts awakened in Afghanistan – pulled my focus towards a sound that should not be there. I reached beneath my pillow and took out the makeshift shiv I carried for protection and slipped from the bed.

Click. The strange noise occurred again, outside the room. A mechanical sound, apart from the hum of the heaters and the muted garble of the infomercial on TV. I crept silently across the cheap carpet and pressed myself against the wall beside the window, peering through the small gap between the crooked blinds and the smeared window at the night outside.

Parking lot lights backlit the scene outside, but my eyes adjusted to the sight of a figure in a long coat pointing a camera through the curtain and into the motel room. Muscles tensed inside me, focusing on the doorknob. If the shadowy figure made a move for the door, I would use the long, skinny blade held point uppermost against my forearm.

Why would somebody be interested in a bunch of homeless bums in a motel room? I wondered, narrowing my eyes and trying to get a clearer look at the figure outside. No answers emerged from the feverish muddle in my mind. But the doorknob never moved, not in the breathless eternity of seconds, and I saw the figure retreat into the murk.

I waited beside the window until the sun came up. The figure never returned. Before my compatriots ever stirred, I pulled on my clean but threadbare clothes and left, wondering who could have been looking in on a bunch of nobodies in the night.

Unless one of the nobodies was a somebody...

* * * * *

I panhandled for most of the day, trying to ignore my growling stomach as I watched the scant coins in my cup grow no more plentiful during the cold, windy morning. Hunger got the better of me shortly after noon, and I wandered the deserted restaurants along the stretch of Market Street I haunted looking for leftovers. Nobody came out in the nasty weather, so I resigned myself to a long day of cold and hunger. I decided to camp out in line for the Lutheran shelter, hoping to get a hot meal in the evening before they ran out of food. As I cut through Freddy Mac's alley to get to Crawley Street, I ran across Rodney, contentedly smoking a cigarette gleaned from god-only-knew what source.

“Hey, man,” I grunted to him. He patted my shoulder and passed me the smoke. I took a long drag – trying not to gag on the menthol – and exhaled before passing the Newport back to him gratefully. Anything to curb my appetite.

“What's goin' on, Greg?”

“Struck out on Market,” I said, jingling my nearly empty cup. “Was gonna head over to the Redeemer mission, camp out in line. I'm hungry as shit.”

“Man, fuck Redeemer,” Rodney said. “Head over to the new place.”

My eyebrows rose. “What new place?”

“Private joint,” Rodney said. “Corner of Crawley and Congress. Ain't no sign on the door or nothing, you gotta know where that shit is. Just opened the morning, in the old real estate office.”

“No shit,” I said.

“Yeah, they got tons of food. Serve all day,” Rodney said.

“Shit, sounds good to me, brother,” I told him. “You coming?”



“Yeah, they got tons of food. Serve all day,” Rodney said.

“I just left,” he said. He patted his stomach happily. “Biscuits and gravy for breakfast.”

I waved to him and tried not to break into a sprint around the corner, my hunger driving me on.

The old real estate office looked no different than it had the millions of other times I'd passed it. I pushed through the door into a warm, freshly-painted interior. Everything looked new and clean, even the folding tables and chairs filled with street people, all hunched over heaping plates of food which gave off delicious smells. I piled into the line, only a few people before me, and tried not to fidget or push people out of my way to get to the kitchen.

A young, svelte girl of about nineteen or twenty greeted me with a welcoming smile, a younger boy who might have been her brother standing beside her. “Hi,” she said. “Welcome. You hungry?”

I could only nod dumbly. She heaped a plate with food and passed it to me with a cup of coffee and a bottle of water. I slumped into a nearby chair and fell to with a will, stuffing my face and swallowing as fast as I could chew, feeling the gnawing emptiness in my middle start to sate.

A slender hand alit on the table next to the plate that was the center of my universe, manicured nails clicking softly against the formica. I looked up to see a glamorous, slender woman standing next to me, regarding me with a considering smile. I immediately felt like a filthy bum just being hear her, in her designer outfit with the tasteful jewelry and the movie-star perfection of her makeup and dark hair. She looked me over through expensive glasses, then addressed me in a warm, friendly contralto.

“Are you Greg Reynolds?” she asked softly.

My natural suspicion got the better of me. “Who's asking?”

“My name is Dr. Cynthia Thorne,” she said. “May I sit?”

I gestured towards an empty chair, trying to swallow my mouthful of food and nearly choking.

“Mr. Reynolds,” she said, steepling her fingers. “I was hoping you'd find us here.”

“Find you? What are you talking about?” I sputtered.

She laid her purse on the table alongside her arm and accepted a cup of coffee from one of the passing volunteers. She waited a moment, like this was some fancy little café in the trendy part of time, as she stirred creamer into the thick black liquid before she continued.

“Please, don't let me stop you from eating,” she bade. “You look like you haven't eaten in a while.”

“Couple days,” I said, sinking my teeth into a burger. I couldn't keep my eyes off of her purse, though, a pink leather Gucci hobo bag that I'd seen in one of the store windows of the upscale boutiques on Market Street. A purse for an important woman, a glamorous woman, a woman who got whatever she wanted. The kind of woman that dwelt inside me, looking for ways out.

“I have a proposition for you,” she said simply. “I received word of you from a colleague of mine who worked at the blood and tissue center where you donated. You have very unusual genetics.”

I grunted. “Proposition?”

“I'd like to speak to you about running a series of tests,” she said. She slid a business card across the table towards me. “You'd be compensated, of course.”

I eyeballed the card skeptically. “Look, ma'am, I appreciate you doing your part to help the homeless and all, but I'm not interested in medical tests,” I told her. “Couple buddies of mine volunteered a few months ago. Whatever they gave them in there really fucked them up, pardon the French.”

“I see,” she said. “I'm not talking about a drug trial, Mr. Reynolds. I mean taking blood and tissue samples from you, studying your genetics.”

I slid the card across the table back to her. "Not interested."

She placed a finger on the card and slid it back. "Keep it," she said. "In case you change your mind."

* * * * *

Christmas shopping came into full swing a few days later, after Thanksgiving. The weather took such a nasty turn that myself and several of my fellow street denizens took to going into the stores with the throngs of shoppers just to get warm. Ordinarily we got chased out in short order, but even a few minutes of warm and dry proved to be worth the hassle of the mall cops and store security.

I was doing just that, in one of the larger department stores along Market Street, when my eye got drawn away from the cookware I'd pretended to give a shit about. Across the aisle I saw Shangri-La, the place I most wanted to avoid. The lingerie section, with its lace and satin and silk and bright colors drew me like a moth to a flame. The part of me I tried so hard to deny rose inside me, screaming with want. My feet began moving towards the racks of lacy, feminine underwear of their own volition.

Dammit, why did I even come in here? I cursed myself as my fingers trailed through shimmering curtains of lace and satin on the racks. The *want* inside me changed slowly but inexorably into needle-pointed *need*. I couldn't walk away. I had to have.

No, stupid, don't! I screamed at myself. *There's cameras! Don't do it!*

But my hands came to rest on a pink bra with lovely pearl beading and before I knew it, I was shoving it beneath my shirt. I didn't even check the size, I doubted it would even fit around me, but the girl inside me that ruined my life could no more help herself than I could.



No, stupid, don't! I screamed at myself. *There's cameras! Don't do it!*

I hunched over in a mixture of panic and shame and made my way towards the doors. The bitter cold and sleet outside would be my punishment, I decided, for being such a weak-willed dumbass. The greyish light of the sky outside loomed closer with each hurried footstep, edging me closer and closer to freedom. Five steps before the door, I finally began to feel as though my lapse would not cost me, when a strong hand closed around my bicep.

Marine training kicked in and I rounded on the store detective, striking his wrist and breaking his grip with my free hand while bringing my foot down hard on the inside of his knee. The man howled in pain and sank to his knees. I drew back my fist to punch him, to lay him out before making my escape. A tiny little twinge of guilt slowed me, just long enough for two security guards to reach me and bear me down to the floor.

* * * * *

“Gregory Everett Reynolds, you have been found guilty of assault and petty theft. I hereby sentence you to ninety days in County and mandatory psychiatric evaluation,” the judge said, bringing down his gavel with dreadful finality. Bailiffs hoisted me by the arms and dragged me towards the side door as the next case began setting up. The haggard-looking public defender assigned to my case gave me an apologetic grimace.

“Thanks for trying, man,” I told him as the bailiffs led me away. I expected to be led back to processing, the way I had before when I got nabbed for the *de facto* petty crimes by which the homeless survived, looking forward to spending the rest of the winter in a comfy, heated cell with three square meals a day and even cable television. But instead of making a right at the end of the short corridor, towards the bus to take me to County, the bailiffs pushed me through a door at the end of the hall. The room beyond held only a small medical exam table and a couple chairs. Spartan medicine for society's forgotten. I plopped onto the table and just waited, knowing that if I asked questions the bailiffs might get rough. They locked me in the room alone with just the hum of the radiator to keep me company.

A few minutes later, the lock clicked and the door squeaked open. The slender, glamorous doctor from the shelter entered, wearing a white lab coat. She waved away the bailiff that offered to accompany her, waiting until the door closed behind her before she spoke.

“Hello again, Mr. Reynolds,” she said. “Remember me?”



The slender, glamorous doctor from the shelter entered, wearing a white lab coat.

“Yeah,” I replied. “The doc from the shelter. You offered to pay me to let you experiment on me.”

She chuckled richly. “I suppose I should protest,” she said fondly, “but you have the essence of it.”

“Why are you here?”

“I wanted to take you to lunch,” she told me.

“You're a riot,” I told her. “I'm incarcerated, in case you didn't notice.”

She pursed her lips sexily. “I think we can dispense with that unfortunate circumstance,” she told me. “Judge Hoskins is a friend of mine. He has agreed to release you for an hour or two into my custody before you're sent to County. Long enough to hear me out, at any rate. What happens after that is entirely up to you.”

“The proposition again?”

She nodded. “But now you're a captive audience,” she clarified. “At least now you have to sit and listen to the whole story before you say 'no.' That's good enough for me.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “But I'm not really dressed for lunch on the town.” I picked at the itchy orange jumpsuit I wore.

"I brought some clothes," she said. "I had to guess at the sizes."

I gave her a sarcastic look. "I live on the streets, Doc," I told her. "New clothes? I'll make them fit."

* * * * *

I figured the sophisticated doctor would have taken me someplace fancy, something in keeping with her refined tastes. But she picked a middle-of-the-road burger joint and didn't bat a long eyelash when I ordered two triple cheeseburgers, a double order of gravy fries and a king-size milkshake.



"I live on the streets, Doc," I told her

She sipped coffee across from me while I set to like a starving man. The burger was done to perfection, dripping with hot grease and cut thick, just the way I liked it. But even though stuffing my face dominated most of my concentration, I couldn't help shooting sidelong looks at the purse sitting alongside Dr. Thorne's elbow. I saw the pink, quilted leather Gucci hobo bag in a few of the windows of the upscale boutiques along Market Street, thinking that would be the kind of bag a successful, glamorous, sexy and sophisticated woman would carry. A woman who got what she wanted. The kind of woman I wanted to be most in the world.

Dr. Thorne must have noticed my glances, because she regarded me with a kind smile. "So it is true."

"What's true?" I asked.

"You are transgendered," she said simply, without a hint of malice. Even so, I ducked down and looked around us frantically, scanning to see if anyone overheard. She placed a warm hand on

mine.

“Calm down,” she said. “You'll get no ridicule or judgment from me.”

I sighed. No point in denying anything. “I'm just not used to hearing it out loud,” I told her. “I keep that secret pretty close to my vest.”

“I apologize,” she told me. She patted the designer purse. “You like?”

I nodded. “I think it's beautiful,” I muttered, cheeks coloring.

She pushed it towards me. “Once I clean it out, it's yours.”

I almost choked. “Seriously?”

“It was a gift from an ex,” she told me. “It doesn't really go with the outfits I choose. Truthfully, I don't care for it very much, but it would obviously mean the world to you. You should have it. You deserve nice things.”

I sat back, eyeing the purse and trying to breathe out the *want* inside me with long, deep breaths.

“So, on to business,” she announced, sipping coffee. “I don't mean to presume, but I take it you don't read many medical journals.”

“I don't read many anythings,” I said.

“Well, you wouldn't know, then, that I'm rather famous,” she said.

“Famous how?”

“I invented a few things,” she told me. “Lots of things, but the biggest thing I came up with was the process by which same-sex couples could conceive a child.”

“No shit,” I breathed. “That's incredible.”

“Yes and no,” she went on. “Sadly, the process wasn't perfected until after I used it to conceive a child with my ex-wife Amanda. So my son Jeff has a few... abnormalities.”

“What kind of stuff we talking about?”

“The male reproductive cell determines a child's gender,” Dr. Thorne said professorially. “When two women such as myself and Amanda combine their DNA to form a child, that offspring should automatically be female. But Amanda wanted a son so badly, that I went out on a limb. When I changed my X-chromosome into a Y-chromosome to make Jeff a male, something went wrong.”

“He's twenty years old but looks like he's eleven or twelve,” she explained. “He isn't aging

properly. Also, I discovered some chromosomal irregularities. He seems to be incapable of experiencing puberty because his cells don't have uniform DNA. Some of his cells contain a Y-chromosome and others do not. We corrected the flaw in the process, but that doesn't help my poor Jeff."

"That's too bad," I said. "But what do you need me for?"

"I've actually been watching you for some time," she told me. "Since your original Marine Corps physical. You made the long list of potential candidates to help me find a way to repair the genetic damage to Jeff's chromosomes. I've been winnowing down that list for nearly a decade. You kept making the cut, Mr. Reynolds, and now you're one of the last three remaining candidates."

"So why aren't you talking to them?"

"Because you are uniquely suited to what I have in mind," she replied. "The simplest method to repair the damage to my son is to simply replace his damaged Y-chromosomes with healthy ones."

"Sounds simple enough," I said.

"It isn't, but that's not the point," she said. "But there's a problem. If I take the Y-chromosomes from a donor, using the transfer process I've developed, they are gone. The only way to replace them is by cloning the donor's remaining sex chromosome. The X-chromosome."

I shook my head. "I flunked biology in high school, Doc. You're gonna have to break it down a little."

"Of course. Females have two X-chromosomes, males have an X- and a Y-chromosome. In essence, the Y-chromosome makes you biologically male," she explained. "I want to take yours and give them to my son. When I'm done, you won't have any left. You'll have to replace those chromosomes with a copy of the X-chromosome you have left. All the cells in your body with have two X-chromosomes, which would make you..."

"...a girl," I breathed.

She leaned forward. "I couldn't, in good conscience, ask either of the other candidates with compatible genetics. They're fathers and husbands, completely comfortable in their genders," she said. "I'd almost given up hope before I met you. A compatible donor with gender identity disorder."

She took my hands in hers and gripped surprisingly tight. "You're a gift from above, Greg."

"You want to take out the stuff that makes me a guy and put it in your son?" I said, my voice breaking with laughter. "You're fucking with me, aren't you?"

"I promise you, I'm not."

“You can actually do all that shit you just said?”

“I can,” she said without a hint of boasting. “I’ve done it successfully in chimpanzees and rhesus monkeys several times. Both subjects are completely healthy in all cases. The process is very safe.”

I rubbed my eyes. “So, what, you’re just gonna make me into a girl, then what?”

“I don’t take your meaning?”

“Girliest thing I ever did in my life was use lavender-scented soap once,” I said. “You’re gonna zap me, change me into a girl, then cut me loose? Doc, all due respect, but I’d be turning tricks or get gang-raped to death within a week.”

She eyed me considerably. “I never really thought much about the aftermath,” she said. “I have many contacts who might be able to help, and I could designate a portion of the funds when I sell the process to support you in a new life. If it saves my Jeff, I’d give you anything I have.”

I tapped my bottom lip in thought. “Let’s assume, for a minute, that I believe you. What happens?”

She let go of my hands and sat back, composing herself a little. “You would come and live with me. The process would take several months. In layman’s terms, I would introduce a custom blood cell that I designed into your body. These blood cells would take up your Y-chromosomes when they were released from your cells and deliver them to a small food source I would implant in the back of your neck. I would extract them every week or so, modify them to insert themselves into Jeff’s cells, then inject them into him. At the same time, I would introduce a protein into your blood which would force your remaining X-chromosome to replicate itself.”

“Sounds like a hell of a way to get a job done,” I said.

“The only way I can determine which would keep the two of you both alive.”

“That’s a plus.”

“While you underwent the process, I would send you to school with Jeff. For all that he insisted on going to school like a normal kid, he is far from normal right now. He gets bullied for his size and his youthful appearance. I’d like it if you could make yourself a sort of protector for him until the process works. In exchange, I would house you, feed you and clothe you for the duration. I even have a car you can use. I can provide you with anything you need, including a life coach to help you transition into your new gender.”

I blew out a long breath. “It’s a lot to take in,” I told her. “But I think I actually believe you.”

“I’m glad.”

"My sonofabitch dad always said, though, if something sounds too good to be true, then it probably is," I went on. "You're talking about screwing with my DNA, and I only have your word that it's not gonna fuck me up for the rest of my life."

"I can show you all my data."

"And I probably won't understand a goddamned word of it," I replied.

"So what will it take to convince you?"

"First, get me out of jail," I told her. "Then, I wanna meet your son."

"That's not possible right now," Dr. Thorne said. "Jeff is very ill, he's in the hospital with a severe infection. Another consequence of his genetic condition, his immune system hasn't developed properly. I must keep any risk of contamination away from him."

"I'll wash my hands real good," I told her. "It's a deal-breaker, Doc. You're asking me for a lot, for all that I don't particularly want my Y-chromosomes. You're asking me to risk my life, my health and my safety. I'm okay with that - I'm a Marine, that's in the bylaws. But I want to meet the reason why I'm doing it. Make my own decisions."

She looked at me long and hard. "I see your point. Okay, done. Anything else?"

"I'm assuming the help you're gonna give me transitioning from one to another includes help with all my identification? My birth certificate, my service record, that kind of stuff?"

"Of course."

"We haven't really talked money, yet."

"Name your price."

"I don't have a specific number. Not yet, at least. Not until I meet Jeff. If he turns out to be an asshole, then I'm gonna charge through the nose. If he's worth it, then, we'll talk. But I want enough to keep that homeless shelter running forever."

"The shelter?"

"There's good people out there, Doc. They deserve a hot meal and a hot shower. I'm assuming you only opened the place to lure me in, get a chance to get eyes on me. I'm not gonna let it fade away because you found me."

Thorne smiled warmly at me. "I had a feeling about you, Mr. Reynolds."

"I haven't told you 'yes,' yet," I said. "But if we go forward, you're going to have to get rid of that 'Mister' stuff. My dad used to call me that when he was pissed off at me. Always hated it."

"So call you Greg, then?" Thorne asked.

"Hell, no," I told her. "I'm taking a girl's name first thing. I didn't mean you can't call me Reynolds. Just not 'Mister' Reynolds."

She nodded in comprehension. "Very reasonable, *Miss Reynolds*," she said with an amused smile.

"Much better," I told her. "Now, how about getting me the fuck out of jail?"

"Let me make a call," she told me.

"And I could really use some warm clothes, too," I told her. "The stuff they took off me at lockup, it's about worn through. I've been cold for so long, I don't remember anything else. I could really use a coat."

"Anything in particular?" she asked me.

"Something pink. With rhinestones," I told her, and she grinned even wider.

THE ROOM THAT DR. THORNE offered me to live ranked close to the nicest place I'd ever seen. Thick carpet padded the floor, a rich burgundy, and floor-to-ceiling mirrors covered one wall. A pleasant, soothing pastel pink adorned the walls and white trim set off the edges. Gauzy pink curtains softened the light coming through the room's two large windows. A large double four-poster bed, a large dresser and a makeup table, all in white, dotted the room. Two other doors led to an enormous walk-in closet and a luxurious white-tiled bathroom.

Dr. Thorne had taken the liberty of providing me a few things to wear – all women's clothing – and even put a little pink teddy bear on the white coverlet of the bed. I pulled the little sparkly Hello Kitty ring from my pocket and placed it in a white ballerina jewelry box on the vanity, then consigned all my other clothing to the outside firepit. I scampered around the enormous house in a little lavender sweater-dress and smoky grey hose, poking into this room and that and raiding the capacious fridge in the house's enormous kitchen.

"So, how do you like it?" Dr. Thorne asked from the doorway behind me as I sprawled on the couch and surfed the channels on the gigantic television.

I thumbed the "mute" key on the remote and spun around to face her, legs drawn up beneath me. "It's the nicest place I've ever been in," I told her honestly. "I don't know if I'll ever get used to it all."

She looked around. "Knowing you has certainly driven home how very fortunate I am," she said dreamily. "As a matter of fact, I've taken your demands to heart. I've moved a bit of money around and should be able to keep the homeless shelter open in perpetuity. And open another across town."

"That's really good," I said.

"I got you something," Dr. Thorne told me. She withdrew a pink smartphone from her pocket and handed it to me. A little rhinestone heart fob dangled from the wristband, catching the light. "So we can be in contact once Jeff is released from the hospital."

I took the expensive gadget and looked it over. "Never had one of these before. Hope you kept the instructions."

"They're in your room, along with the charger," Dr. Thorne said. "I wanted to let you know, I've called ahead to the hospital. Jeff's immune response has improved. We should be able to see him in the morning."

"That's great," I said. "I'm looking forward to meeting him."

She laughed, a bit self-consciously. "It's strange," she commented, rubbing her nose. "I've spent so long protecting Jeff from everything. Now I found the person who's going to save his life and I can't stop feeling this ridiculous urge to protect him from you."

"The thought of me meeting your son freaks you out that bad?" I asked.

"Bad-ly," she corrected gently. "And yes. It does. I'm still not sure why."

"I'm not gonna hurt him, Doc," I said. "I promise."

"I know I will believe you once I see the two of you together," she breathed. "For now, I'm just going to worry. It's a mother's prerogative, you understand."

"I guess that's fair," I said, mouth stretched wide by a yawn before I could finish the words.

Dr. Thorne reached out and gently caressed my upper arm. "You poor thing," she said. "You must be exhausted."

"It's been a while since I've been able to sleep," I told her. "Lockup isn't exactly restful."

She patted my shoulders simultaneously. "Off to bed, then," she said. "You sleep until you wake up tomorrow. We can leave for the hospital once you've had a good night's rest. Oh – and be sure to moisturize before you go to sleep. We girls have to care for our skin if we want to stay looking nice."

I rubbed the back of my neck sheepishly. "I, uh... I don't have anything..."

She waved a dismissive hand. "Of course you do. It's all in your bathroom, my dear. Help yourself to anything," she said. "It's the very least I can do."

"It's a lot. Maybe too much," I told her.

Her look deepened into seriousness. "Nonsense," she stated flatly. "There is nothing I can do, nothing I can give, which will ever be able to thank you for what you're doing."

"I haven't done it yet, Doc."

"I have the advantage of knowing Jeff already," she said. "You'll adore him. I'm positive."

"We'll find out tomorrow," I said. "Good night."

"G'night, Doc."

"Please, my dear, start calling my Cynthia. I hate feeling like I'm a guest lecturer in my own home."

"Okay," I chuckled.

"And have you determined what I should call you?"

"Working on it," I said. "I was thinking, if we do this thing, maybe Jeff should get a vote. He's gonna be largely responsible for the change, after all."

"That's very sweet," Cynthia said. "Now, off to bed."

"But moisturize first," I said.

"You learn quickly," she told me, kissing my cheek before hustling me down the hallway.

* * * * *

I rose shortly after dawn, nestled in the thick blankets of the warm, soft bed that seemed to swallow me in comfort. I stretched and rubbed my eyes, coming down from my blissful rest like coming down from a drug. My body fairly glowed with well-being.

I didn't bother to slip out of the knee-length sleep shirt – pastel blue, with "Sleeping Beauty" picked out in navy embroidery on the chest – and raided the kitchen once more for breakfast. Cynthia came in as I rolled a thick slice of bacon in a crescent roll and stuffed it into my mouth. She kissed my forehead and put on a kettle for tea.

"How did you sleep?" she asked me, sitting down beside me.

"I didn't know I could sleep like that," I told her honestly. "I don't think I've ever felt so rested."

"Glad to hear it," she said. "What are your plans for the morning?"

"Take a shower. A long one. Then get dressed and go meet Jeff."

She laughed. "Such ambition."

"Maybe try to fit a second breakfast in there," I added. "Y'know, *really* shoot for the stars."

She tittered laughter. "I put a few things in the bath for you," she said. "A few things whipped up by a chemist friend of mine. There's a body wash which will help curb the growth of your body hair, and a shampoo and conditioner which should grow your hair at an accelerated rate. Understand, though, that these aren't miracle products. You'll still have to wait to grow your hair, just not as long. And you'll still need to shave."

"Or get waxed," I said. "Either way, thanks. That was very thoughtful."

"The day is completely yours," she told me. "Is there anything you need or want to do?"

I stood up and knuckled my back, finishing my breakfast with a long drink of coffee. "Better get moving, then," I announced, giving her arm a friendly squeeze. "Don't want to keep Jeff waiting."

* * * * *

Dr. Thorne questioned me, on the short drive to the private hospital on the outskirts of the city, on why I decided to dress in a masculine way for my first meeting with Jeff. I couldn't really say, other than a niggling feeling in the back of my mind that I didn't want to freak him out right at first. I surprised myself by realizing, as we pulled into the parking lot, that I actually really wanted this mysterious Jeff to like me. He'd see me in a dress soon enough. For now, even if it was for the last time, I wanted to size the younger Thorne up man-to-man.

The keyless lock of the high-end Mercedes chirped as Cynthia clicked the fob over her shoulder. For the first time, I saw the elegant, sophisticated doctor nervous and fidgety. Apparently, she wanted the meeting to go well as much as I did. We caught one another's eye and broke into a trill of nervous laughter.

"First date jitters," I told her.

"He's so precious to me," she confessed. "He's all I have left of Amanda, and the love of my life."

I took her hand. "Relax," I said. "I'll charm the socks off of him."

She grinned. "I believe you will." She led me into a marble-floored lobby and gestured to a couch near the bank of elevators. "Wait here. I'll bring him down."

"I don't mind going up," I told her.

"He does," she said. "I texted him last night. He said he doesn't want you to meet him in a hospital bed. He doesn't want you thinking that he's weak."

"I like this guy already," I told her, having a seat. I reminded myself to cross my legs demurely at the ankle instead of spreading my knees. Now that I had even a sci-fi chance in hell of actually being the girl my soul identified with, I wanted to practice. Learn the ways of being ladylike.



I amused myself for a while thumbing through a back issue of *Cosmopolitan* from the glass-topped end table beside me, reveling in the forbidden female articles and ads. I scarcely allowed myself to hope that the day would come soon where I could read *Cosmo* or *Vogue* or *Elle* in public and not draw weird looks. Wear a dress and not feel self-conscious or like a freak. The thought of living a life like that thrilled and terrified me all at the same time.

The elevator dinged cheerfully and the doors parted to reveal Dr. Thorne, pushing a frail-looking kid in a wheelchair. I remembered the doc saying Jeff was twenty years old, but the pale skinny boy wrapped warmly in the wheelchair looked as if he couldn't be a day over twelve. He stuck out a hand in greeting, which trembled a little bit with the effort.

"Hi," he said brightly. "I'm Jeff Thorne."

"Nice to meet you," I told him. "I'm Greg Reynolds. At least for now, that is. I assume your mom told you what's going on? What she wants to try and do?"

"Yeah," he said. "I can't believe you're up for it, actually."

"It's a little overwhelming, I can say that much."

"I'm really glad you asked to meet first," Jeff said. "It would have been weird, y'know? Doing something like that with a total stranger."

"That's what I thought," I replied.

“What should we do now?” Dr. Thorne interjected. “I’m sure you two don’t want to sit out here in the lobby all morning. Are you hungry, Jeff?”

“Not really,” he said. “Greg?”

I laughed. “I’m not the one you should be asking. I’m always hungry.”

“I’d really like to go outside,” Jeff told his mother over his shoulder.

“Oh, Jeff, honey, it’s...”

“...freezing outside, I know, I know,” he finished for her. “Mom, I’m not made out of tissue paper. I swear I won’t blow away. I haven’t had fresh air in almost a week.”

She fussed for a moment with Jeff’s scarf before reluctantly passing the handles of the wheelchair over to me. I gave her a reassuring smile and headed out for the little enclosed courtyard in the center of the curtain-walled building.

The doors closed behind us and the biting cold stung my face and caused our breath to mist in clouds in front of us. A light, chilly drizzle drifted down from the colorless sky and beaded up on the shoulders of Jeff’s fleece jacket.

“So, Mom only gave me the basics,” Jeff started. “Name, rank and serial number. I hardly know anything about you. Tell me about yourself.”

“Well, I was born in a little town in Alabama just outside of Birminham...”

* * * * *

“...so after I got home from Afghanistan, everything just kinda fell to shit. Couldn’t hold a job, burned through all my money, no family and no friends to fall back on. Even my old Marine Corps buddies wouldn’t give me the time of day, not to the freakjob who wore girl’s underwear under his fatigues, even in combat. I wound up on the streets, where I transformed into this gorgeous specimen of humanity you see before you. King me.”

Jeff stacked a checker on top of the one I’d just maneuvered onto his back row. “You should be saying, ‘queen me,’ don’t you think?”

“Whatever,” I said, flipping him the bird as he grinned at me. I scratched the back of my neck, near the base of my skull. Three days earlier, Dr. Thorne had implanted a disk of dense, flexible material just beneath the skin. Afterwards, she shot me full of whatever little doohickeys were going to suck up my free Y-chromosomes and carry them off, Cynthia told me this would be the place where they congregated, making for easy extraction. I didn’t know whether I believed her or not. I couldn’t understand but a third of what she said when shit got scientific, anyway. All I did know was that the implant itched like fuck. She promised me things would get better once the treatments finally started.

"Kind of a sad story," Jeff commented.

"Not looking for pity," I said. "It's nobody's fault but my own."

"You didn't make your dad such a dick," Jeff said.

"You know, I've been coming here to see you every day for a week," I told Jeff amusedly. "And your dime-store Sigmund Freud shit isn't getting any more perceptive. You suck at psychology."



"Kind of a sad story," Jeff commented.

"You should listen to me," Jeff laughed, considering his next move on the checkerboard. "Maybe if you'd had someone like me to listen to, you wouldn't have fucked up your life so bad."

I laughed aloud. "You got some pair of balls on you."

"You won't. Not for much longer," he teased.

I looked down at my watch. "Thanks for reminding me," I said. "Listen, Jeff, I better jet. Your mom is giving me the first of the treatments today. Don't want to be late."

Jeff blew out a long breath. "Wow," he said. "D-Day. It's really happening, isn't it?"

"Think it'll work?" I asked.

“Mom doesn't usually make shit up,” Jeff told me. “If she says it'll work, chances are it'll work. Means you're gonna need to finally pick out that name.”

I stood and smoothed my grey sweaterdress. Jeff didn't say a word. He would tease me mercilessly about almost anything, but not my choice of clothes. No one at the hospital ever said a word about the boy in the dress who came every day. As one of the hospital's major donors, I'm sure that word got around that I was very important to Dr. Thorne. The staff – hell, maybe even the patients – probably got the message that fucking with me would be deeply detrimental. At least it let me dress the way I wanted and not get weird looks. That, in and of itself, was a blessing.

I bid Jeff farewell and hustled down the hall to the elevator, slinging my Gucci purse – part of Dr. Thorne's and my original arrangement – over my shoulder as I scurried along. I was glad I hadn't worked my way up to high heels yet, I doubted my ability to hurry anywhere in anything other than the fleece-lined boots I wore right now. Below, outside the lobby, the little Nissan Altima lent to me by Dr. Thorne purred to life at a touch of my keyfob and I dropped inside, cranking the heater as I plopped my purse into the front seat.

Cynthia was waiting for me when I arrived back at her house. At her urging, I changed from my dress and hose into an open-backed hospital gown. Cynthia took me down into the basement, to her personal laboratory, and seated me on an exam table.

“Nervous?” she asked me.

“A little,” I confessed. “I keep thinking that this is gonna hurt or something.”

“It shouldn't,” she told me. She held up the extractor, a little gadget with a metal nozzle on top and a little empty glass vial attached to the bottom. “Think about it like this. You have enough genetic material inside you to make up a one hundred and fifty pound body. I'm removing that about a teaspoon at a time. Nothing's being ripped away. It's being sucked out in tiny little amounts. Every extraction is one tiny little step towards womanhood.”



"Nervous?" she asked me.

"Okay," I told her, releasing a long pent-up breath. "Let's do this."

Wordlessly, she pressed the cold bell of the extractor to the base of my neck over the implant. I felt a stinging pinch and heard a little hiss. The bell of the little machine grew warm rapidly. Thorne put a reassuring hand on my arm and offered me a fragile smile.

The pinch cut off as abruptly as it began and she held the extractor up to the light. The glass vial, formerly empty, now contained an amber fluid that resembled iced tea. I reached out as Dr. Thorne separated the vial from the gadget. She placed the vial in my hand. It felt warm against my palm.

"Looks kinda insignificant, doesn't it? All that science and this is all you get."

She took the vial and placed it carefully in a tray. "This is plenty. It's the cure for my son." She locked the vial in a glass-fronted refrigerator and sagged a little, steadying herself against the wall. I rose and put my arms around her, resting my cheek against her smooth shoulder.

"Thank you," she breathed. "Thank you so much."

She turned around and took my face between her hands, huge grateful tears glistening in her eyes. "I wish I knew what to call you," she said a little breathlessly. "The woman I owe so much."

I cast back through my mind, past the years spent on the streets or in the cold fields of

Afghanistan, then locked in a room hiding my true self from a mother and father who stood to hate me for what I was. I searched those pallid memories for a glimmer of happiness, a name to put with to something bright and wonderful and happy amidst that bleak array of loneliness and shame. A girl's face, from school, pretty and cheerful and beautiful, the paragon of everything I secretly wanted so badly.

"Tiffany," I said. "My name is Tiffany."

* * * * *

I think the new name, as much as the beginning of the treatments, opened the floodgates for me. It was no longer enough to wear a dress – it had to be a pink dress, with lace or sparkles. Bows in my slowly lengthening hair. But the vast ocean of things I didn't know about being a woman loomed in front of me, keeping me away from the true communion I desired.

I read everything I could get my hands on, practiced endlessly to movie stars and YouTube videos, but still had not the first fucking clue about being a girl. I started to panic inside. Sure I might eventually wind up with the body of a girl, but the mind? The mannerisms? The product of years and years of living female, those habits and innate things that made me fully female?

I sat in the front room in front of a cheerful fire, reading *The Female Brain* for the second time, when Dr. Thorne came in from the hall. She leaned over the back of the couch and planted a kiss on my cheek, making me smile and cuddle against her arm.

"I have someone with me that I want you to meet, Tiffany," she said brightly.

"Who's that?"

"A friend of mine. I met her during my residency," she answered. A petite blonde woman with an infectious smile stepped around the wall from the entryway. "Tiffany, this is Mackenzi. Mackenzi Levinson. Mac, meet Tiffany Reynolds."

She stuck out her hand, palm downwards. "Glad to meet you, Tiffany. I love your dress."



"Glad to meet you, Tiffany. I love your dress."

"Thanks," I said, looking down at the simple pink dress I wore. "I, uh... I like yours, too."

"That's good," Mackenzi told me. "Returning the compliment. A lot of guys, they don't do that. Excellent."

My confusion must have registered on my face. Dr. Thorne interjected. "I'm going to have my hands full for a few weeks," she said. "Mackenzi is a life coach, among other things. She specializes in helping transgender people transition from one gender to another."

"I'm going to help make you a proper young lady," Mackenzi boasted with a sweet smile.

I shook her hand, which I realized I still held, a little more warmly. "Wow, am I glad to meet you, then. I'm starting to feel like I'm never going to get all this stuff down."

She chuckled. "Of course you will," she soothed. "It's not particularly hard, Tiffany, there's just so much of it. So much to keep track of. I'll teach you a few things, sure, but mostly I'm going to show you ways to keep all the information organized in your head so you don't leave anything out."

I shot a glance at Cynthia. "Thanks for this, Doc," I said fondly.

"My pleasure. Now, let me leave you two girls to get acquainted. I'm needed in the lab."

Mackenzi must have noticed the look of shock mixed with joy which crossed my features. “You really liked that, didn't you?” she asked as we watched Dr. Thorne's retreating back. “When she called us *girls*. This is truly what you want, isn't it?”

“My whole life,” I whispered.

“Then we should get started,” Mackenzi told me. “Where would you like to begin?”

“I really want to start wearing makeup. I mean, more than just lip gloss,” I told her. “I love the glamour look. I've read a couple books, y'know, but anything I try, I wind up looking like a rodeo clown. And that's on a good day.”

Mackenzi giggled. “This is going to be fun. You're hilarious,” she commented. “So, why don't you take me back to your room, show me what you've got, and kind of walk me through your skin care routine?”

I shrugged. “Don't really have a routine,” I said. “Didn't know I was supposed to.”

“Call this lesson one, then,” Mackenzi told me, threading her arm through mine. “Every girl's got to have a routine.”

* * * * *

Mackenzi and I spent every waking hour together over the next few days. While Cynthia slaved away in the background, coming out of her lab only long enough to meet with her financial advisors, eat, shower or sleep, Mackenzi and I delved into the finer details of things like skin- and haircare, makeup, social interaction and manners, everything we could dream up. I actually started to relax a bit, feeling a bit more like an actual girl as I learned to take smaller steps, smaller bites, smaller everything. We even started making pencil lines on the wall to track my height, like one did for young kids. But where a child's height would trend upwards, I felt the thrill of watching myself shrink a little. I'd dropped from five foot eleven to five foot ten-and-a-half, and my former weight of one hundred and fifty and change now pegged out at one hundred forty-eight.

I just finished up folding my clothes – I'd started doing my own laundry and ironing – and putting them away. Mackenzi sat crosslegged on the foot of my bed, making notes in a little book and raking her fingers through her long, wavy blonde hair.

I clicked my tongue. “I can't wait until my hair's as long as yours,” I mentioned. “I love how you're always running your fingers through it, flipping it over your shoulder, playing with it.”

She smiled. “Maybe we should get you a wig,” she told me. “Some hair vitamins, at the very least.”

“Have you always had long hair?”

“I chopped it all off in junior high, once,” she told me. “I hated it. Sometimes I think about

growing it down to my butt, just to see what it would look like.”

I nodded. “That's how long I want mine,” I said.

She giggled. “I'm trying to imagine that. I do that a lot, trying to imagine what you're going to look like when all this finishes up,” she told me. “It's funny, I look at you sometimes, when the light hits you a certain way or when you're concentrating on something else, and I can just see the girl inside you starting to peek out.”

“And?” I asked.

“She's beautiful,” Mackenzi said. “Absolutely gorgeous.”

I couldn't keep the warm smile, mirroring the warmth in my chest, from my face. “I never considered that I might actually be pretty, when this started,” I told her. “I mean, that wasn't really what was important to me.”

“I know that,” Mackenzi replied. “But it would be a nice perk, wouldn't it?”

“I guess,” I said. “I never considered it. This wasn't some great reward for me, y'know? This landed in my lap. It's a chance to have a body to match my heart and soul, sure. But a part of me never really believed this was gonna work. No, this has been a chance to maybe help a sick kid and in the process get myself a stake. Start my life over.”

Mackenzi offered me a considering look, tapping her bottom lip with her pen. “So, what do you plan to do when Dr. Thorne is done with you?”

I sat on the edge of my vanity table, pushing a few of my cosmetics out of the way. “I've thought a lot about that,” I told her. “I can only take advantage of Dr. Thorne's hospitality for so long. Once Jeff is cured and healthy, she's going to want to spend time with him. I'd just be a third wheel, and they'd feel obligated to include me. So I guess I'll just pack my bags and head out. Leave this city – too many bad memories here – and maybe head out west, where it's warm. Start over and don't make the same mistakes I did before.”

“That's a little disappointing,” Mackenzi replied. “I mean, I'll miss you. You'll have to promise to stay in touch. But that does affect some of the things you and I are doing.”

“Affect them how?”

“Well, for one thing, I'm going to have to teach you how to cook and how to manage household finances,” she told me. “If you're going off to live on your own.”

“That's a good idea,” I told her.

“And you can't very well pack up your stuff when you don't technically have any stuff,” she went on. “Your clothes, the makeup, everything you have are provided by Dr. Thorne, right?”

“Oh, shit, you're right,” I breathed.

She *tsked*. “Language, young lady,” she said gently.

“Sorry,” I corrected. “No, but you're right. I need my own stuff.”

“Of course you do,” she told me. She proudly presented me with a little booklet. I took it curiously and examined it. The booklet was a bank book, listing a checking account and a savings account under the name 'Tiffany Elizabeth Reynolds.' A debit card and a credit card lay tucked behind the back page.

“That's your paycheck,” Mackenzi told me. “Dr. Thorne offered to pay you for your services. That's the first installment. Since I've been working on your identity documents, I figured I'd go ahead and get that done.”

“Wow,” I breathed. “This is more money than I've seen in the last ten years.”

She shook me playfully. “You have to get out of that mindset, Tiff. You're not homeless any more. It may seem like it, but that is *not* a lot of money. You can burn through that in no time and wind up with nothing.”

“Okay,” I said.

“But it's enough to get us started,” Mackenzi said. “Grab your purse, hon. Let's get you a few things.”

* * * * *

Shopping with the vibrant, energetic Mackenzi left me a little breathless – both from the exertion of trying to keep up with her and the twin excitements of appearing in public dressed as a girl and also picking out the accoutrements of my new life.



"Grab your purse, hon. Let's get you a few things."

My hair had grown just enough to style into a little flyaway pixie, and I splurged at the very opening of the shopping spree and got my ears pierced. The woman at the piercing place cautioned me to leave the studs in and turn them once a day, use this disinfectant and that. I nodded and pretended that I would do as she said, then promptly took the studs out and threaded in the biggest, girliest pair of hoops I could find. I loved to feel them tap against my shoulders when I turned my head.

Mackenzi took me through store after store after store. My mind swam with the riot of cuts and colors and designs. Of course, I wanted them all for my own, but my limited budget wouldn't allow. Mackenzi made me do this on a budget, keeping careful track of how much I spent and how much I had left to spend. She wouldn't let me touch the credit card – she called it *poison* – and subsequently I learned to manage the disappointment of leaving the cute suede boots on the rack and walking away empty-handed.

"Don't be so mopey," she teased, nudging my arm. "It's not like your sizes aren't going to change. You shouldn't buy expensive stuff until you know how big you're going to be."

"You're right, you're right," I said mock-dejectedly. "You're no fun, but you're right."

"Besides, the big purchases are here," she told me, holding up the big bag of very high-end makeup and skincare products from the nearby boutique. "This should last you a long time if you use it sparingly. Plus, there's all the stuff that Dr. Thorne got you to get through before you even open these."

“Doesn't seem like much, for what it cost,” I said, peering into the bag.

“Don't be fooled,” she cautioned. “Girls who are serious about it spend a fortune on makeup. We could have cut some costs buying Maybelline or Cover Girl at the grocery store, sure. And there's nothing wrong with those brands, either. I wear them. But you can tell the difference between good makeup and *really* good makeup. I save up for the good stuff. I can't wear it every day, but believe me, sweetie, your skin will thank you for it.”

I hugged her tightly. “I love that I finally get to know all this stuff.”

“I'm glad,” she said. “So, what do you want to do next? You ready for Victoria's Secret yet?”

I looked forlornly down at my chest. “I don't feel like buying a bra when I don't have anything to put in it,” I said a bit sadly. “But if you think we should head there next, I guess we should.”

“Don't let me bust your bubble,” Mackenzi said. “This is about you. It's part of the fun of shopping. I'm not dragging you someplace you don't want to go. If you can't come up with a place all on your own, we can just call it a day and head home.”

I looked around. My sad lack of breasts – which I think I had set in my mind as the endgame for Dr. Thorne's process, the point when I would be a real girl at last – had brought me down, and I pushed backwards in my mind, trying to find that spark of joy and energy that led me out on the shopping excursion in the first place. A rejuvenated sense of enthusiasm tingled through me and I felt my mood lift, energy flowing into my arms and legs, saying *let's go*.

I tugged at her arm. “Oh, look how cute that jacket is! Can I go try it on?” I cooed, pointing at a store window not far away.

Mackenzi giggled. “Sure, sure,” she chuckled. “Wow.”

“What wow?” I asked.

“You said you didn't know what kind of girl you wanted to be,” Mackenzi said. “Turns out you might be a shopaholic bimbo.”

I stopped dead. “Am I?”

“What, a shopaholic, or a bimbo?” Mackenzi teased.

“Either one.”

“You're kind of acting like both, right now,” Mackenzi said.

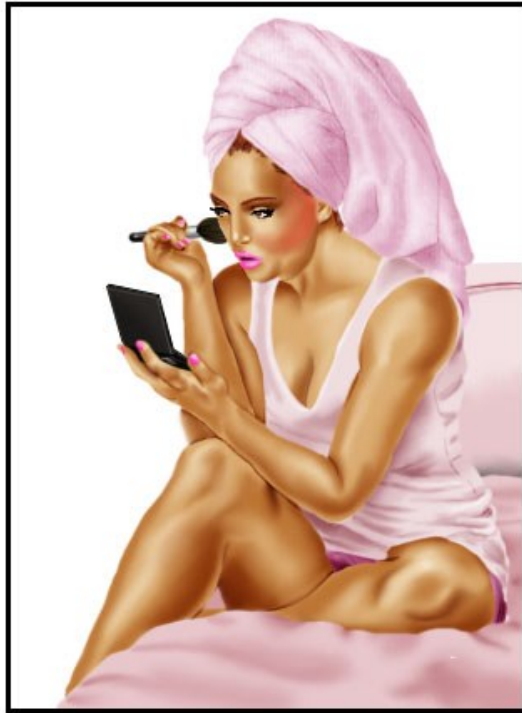
“Cool!” I giggled, bouncing on my toes. “Now, I wanna try on that jacket, and then you have to take me where I can get my first pair of heels. I want to buy a few pairs, each a little taller than the last, so I can work my way up when I practice, okay?”

She laughed out loud. “Sure, bimbo, whatever you say,” she giggled from somewhere in my wake as I dragged her towards the store.

I COULDN'T REALLY SAY WHETHER life settled into a “routine” over the next few weeks, but at least it kept a rhythm. Cynthia kept close tabs on me as the extractions continued, one a day right after breakfast. Since no one had ever done anything like this before, even Cynthia's prodigious mind couldn't envision all the possible outcomes. I spent most of my mornings getting scans or blood tests of one kind or another at the private hospital where Jeff stayed. He and I managed to spend a lot of time together in our drafty hospital gowns, hanging out in waiting rooms and shooting the shit. I found Jeff to be a funny, perceptive companion – nothing like what I originally thought “rich kids” would be like – and I counted myself lucky to have friends like Jeff and Mackenzi to follow me through the transition.

The transition itself was another matter. The little nanites in my blood, busily extracting my male chromosomes from my cells, played havoc with my body. I never knew when I woke up in the morning whether it would be diarrhea and crippling abdominal cramps, alternating between shivering until my teeth chattered and buckets of sweat, blurred vision and inability to find words. I even had a seizure at the breakfast table once. Cynthia guided me safely through every occurrence, medicating me and stabilizing me, taking my symptoms away and soothing any lingering fears.

After the medical trails ended every day, though, I got to dig into my favorite part of the transition – the endless lessons with Mackenzi teaching me how to be a girl. I couldn't get enough of those. She touched on every facet of life, helping me get used to physical contact (I hadn't been much of a hugger before, but I certainly was now), talking expressively and using my hands when I spoke. She brought in boys to help me practice social interactions. I even started to get used to things like people opening doors for me or pulling out my chair at the table. Life as a girl proved to be stranger and more complicated than I ever imagined, but some part of my brain soaked it up insatiably. The more I learned, the more I wanted to learn. Every new trick or workaround distanced Tiffany Reynolds further from Greg Reynolds, the homeless loser stuck in the wrong body who made so many mistakes.



Valerie Hope
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The more I learned, the more I wanted to learn.

After Mackenzi's lessons, I usually grabbed a quick dinner and got to “play” for a while, practicing my makeup skills or walking in heels. Evenings I spent in study – Cynthia demanded that I make some sort of academic showing for some reason, and she enrolled me in an online community college. I suppose I should have thanked her for making that investment in my future, ensuring I would have a way to never be homeless again, but I always hated study and never excelled in school. Outside of the core classes like English literature, history, chemistry and algebra that Cynthia gave me no choice but to take, I burned my electives on things like getting a personal trainer's certificate and studying cosmetology. Either one could help me earn, once this ended and I got kicked to the curb. I guess some part of Cynthia wanted me to earn a Ph.D. and join her among the ranks of the medical elite, but I had no real interest in that. It didn't stop the energetic doctor from encouraging me in the mornings we spent conducting endless tests and the daily extraction to take nursing courses or study biology or something suitably pre-med. It became difficult to suppress a grin when she talked that way. She sounded like a mother, and I cherished her maternal view of me. But I knew I would disappoint her in the end. I would never be the daughter she so wanted.

* * * * *

“Hey, Kenz, can you come here a minute?” I called from my bathroom. This particular Tuesday morning dawned gray and chilly but with a hint of springtime in the air, the first hints that the cold and leaden winter would be leaving soon. I usually woke around five in the morning – the only thing the Marine Corps gave me that I kept – and got in a little light exercise before starting my day. Mackenzi claimed it would serve me in good stead once things got rolling for me, giving

me plenty of time to do my makeup and my hair before my day started.

Mackenzi, still wearing a sleep shirt and rubbing gunk from the corners of her eyes, peered around the corner of the door. "What's up?" she asked through a muffling yawn.

"What did the log say my weight was yesterday?" I asked.

Mackenzi ducked back around the lintel and returned a second later holding a tablet computer. The glow of the touchscreen limned her face in white. "You were down to 142," she said. "You'd been losing about three or four pounds a week, 8% muscle mass, 2% bone mass..."

"Three or four pounds a week, that's what I thought," I said, looking down at the gauge of the scale between my pink-painted toenails. "This is weird."

"What's weird?" Mackenzi asked.

"I gained two pounds."

She rested her chin on my shoulder – and I still had difficulty suppressing the little thrill as her pert breasts pushed into my back – and looked down. "That *is* weird. That's not supposed to happen."

She turned me around and looked me over. "You might look a little pale," she said. "Anything else going on? Any pain? Nausea?"

I shook my head. "Nothing new," I said. I tapped my teeth. "These still hurt like hell."

"Bitch, bitch, bitch," Mackenzi chided at my endless complaining about my new braces. Cynthia brought in an orthodontist two days ago to put them on and my teeth and gums ached like mad. "You'll be thankful, once you finally get them off. A girl's gotta have a million-dollar smile."

"Is that what they actually cost?" I grumped. "Cynthia got swindled."

"I'll let her know what's going on," Mackenzi said, making careful notes on the tablet with a fingertip. "I'm pretty sure it's nothing to worry about, but she said to tell her everything."

"Has she said when I'm going to get the good stuff?" I asked hopefully.

"Sweetie, your breasts will grow in when they're ready," Mackenzi told me sympathetically. "And as for when you will actually start to see a vagina forming, Cynthia said you're looking at a month or more of extractions before that part of the anatomy starts to develop."

I sighed. "I'm just ready to see it, y'know?"

"I can imagine, sweetheart," Mackenzi said with a friendly sidelong hug. "You've stopped having erections, though, right?"

I nodded. “Days ago.” *Good thing, too*, I thought. *Watching Kenz parade around in her underwear in the mornings might have gotten embarrassing in a big damn hurry.*

“Good,” she said. “Now get dressed. You know today's the big day.”

“Think I should dress up?” I asked, thinking about how different the house would feel when Jeff finally came home. He started the infusions of my chromosomes tonight. Soon his own body would be changing as fast as my own.

“I think that might make him feel weird,” Mackenzi told me. “He only ever sees you in a hospital gown. If he showed up to see you in a sequined cocktail dress and hose today, that might make him uncomfortable. No, stick to a t-shirt and shorts. There will be time to dress up later.”

I saw the wisdom, even though it meant not wearing a dress. I loved wearing dresses.

Mackenzi reached out and touched my face gently, brushing my slowly reddening hair out of my eyes. Boy me would have recoiled at that movement. Girl me just allowed it. I felt a flush of pride in my own progress.

“Your hair is getting really long,” she said, finger-fluffing my little bob haircut. “And super soft.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. It had picked up about an inch of length in the last six weeks. “Those special hair vitamins that Cynthia whipped up are amazing. She could make a killing if she sold them.”

Mackenzi smiled. “You don't even want to know what they cost to manufacture,” she giggled. “A month's supply on a retail market would cost as much as a mid-sized car.”

“Some rich Kardashian bitch would spend that much,” I countered.

“Probably so,” Mackenzi said. “Now hustle. Jeff's gonna be here any minute.”

* * * * *

Jeff's homecoming actually turned out rather sedate. I got the impression that stays in the hospital over the last few years were so commonplace that Cynthia and Jeff stopped feeling much about them a while back. I guess I could see the wisdom in that – why celebrate when he would only have to go back in a few weeks? Hopefully, my DNA would spell an end to all that.

After hugs and pleasantries with his mother, who then bustled off back to the lab, Jeff sidled next to me and hip-checked me gently. “What's good, Tiff?” he said brightly.

“Oh, y'know,” I told him airily. “Another day.”

“Not happy to see me at all, then,” he said mock-sadly.

“Nah,” I teased. “The place smells better when you're not around.”

He held me at arm's length and looked me over. "Getting girly, there, bud," he declared.

"Kinda the point, genius," I said, pushing his hands away playfully.

He took in a long breath. "Good to be home," he said. "What do you two girls have going on today?"

Mackenzi – the Keeper of the Holy Schedule – consulted her tablet once more. "You both have scans this morning, and of course Tiffany has her extraction," she said. "I've got Tiffany from one to four for lessons, but if you two wanted to hang out, I could cancel that."

Jeff looked at me with a cocked eyebrow. "Whaddaya say? Want to spend the day in my charming company instead of learning how to put in tampons?"

I snorted. "You are a disgusting little pig, y'know that?" I chuckled. "Tampons are next week. We haven't finished the chapter on douches yet. You figure prominently."

"Oh, it's like that, is it?"

"It's exactly like that," I shot back. "Yeah, what the hell. We can hang out."

"I have the new *Call of Duty* on PlayStation, if you're in the mood to get your ass kicked."

"You're on, sonny boy. Five bucks says I plug your ass ten times in a row."

We sparred back and forth teasingly for a while, leaving the kitchen and into the living room towards the back of the house – Jeff needed to unpack and I still needed to put on my makeup – and failed to notice the warm and knowing smile Mackenzi shot at our backs.

* * * * *

Cynthia stumbled through my daily scans and extractions, distracted by the arrival of her precious son. I didn't press the point of my inexplicable weight gain, not today. Her mind swirled with other things. Still, I felt a little jealous. Now that her *real* child returned, my status as Cynthia's adoptive daughter dwindled a bit. I missed the attention, and the camaraderie of the house being *just us girls*. I choked those feelings down deep, however. I reminded myself that Cynthia's care and attention were, at the root, a business arrangement. I was not her actual daughter, and I never would be. Having a caring mother who accepted me remained only a dream.

I dressed for my workout, just yoga pants and a pink t-shirt and a ball cap, and pushed myself through some cardio and lower body work. I took the adage *Squat to the grass if you want a great ass* to heart, and never skipped leg day. Maybe the weight I gained would be firm, lean butt muscle. Afterwards, I toweled myself dry and repaired my makeup and scampered downstairs in search of something to eat.

I found Jeff in the kitchen, preparing a protein shake in a shaker cup. As always, his gaunt and

denuded appearance struck me. Cynthia showed me birth certificates and documentation, the human being standing on stick-thin hairless legs at the counter had lived twenty years. I never would have pegged him a day older than twelve. He spoke like an adult, he behaved like an adult, he even moved like an adult. But everything about his appearance screamed “kid.”

“Hey, pipsqueak,” I catcalled. “You ready to get tore up?”

He turned around with a bright smile. “You finally done stomping around up there with your giant elephant feet?” he riposted. “Yeah, the PS4's all warmed up. Prepare to get pwned.”

“Dream on,” I said, grabbing a box of cereal from the top of the fridge – which was getting excitingly harder and harder to reach, I now had to stand on tiptoe – and a bottle of water. I gestured grandly into the living room. “After you, dog meat.”



We sprawled side-by-side on the couch, propped up on pillows as we hammered at one another on split-screen. My knowledge of squad-level tactics proved to be too much for him, even though he gave as good as he got, but I roundly dominated him over the next few hours.

We broke after a while, hungry and needing a bathroom. As I entered the kitchen to make myself a sandwich that afternoon, I noticed Mackenzi leaning against the refrigerator with an amused look on her pretty face.

“What's up?” I asked brightly.

“I was going to give you a lesson on flirting today,” she commented dryly, “but I think you've got that covered.”

I fish-mouthed for a moment, struggling for words. “Flirting? You mean – with *Jeff*? You're crazy.”

“Am I?” Mackenzi chuckled. “Why are you blushing?”

“Jeff? Little skinny Jeff? You're on drugs.”

“Sure I am,” Mackenzi said throatily. “And you weren't pressing yourself up against him all afternoon, or pushing your boobs up against his arm every two minutes while you were pretending to put him in a headlock. And if you bit your bottom lip any more, you were gonna chew through it.”

“Kenz, you're out of your fucking mind,” I told her. “He's a friend.”

“So what if you like him?” Mackenzi countered. “He's smart, he's funny, he's sweet...”

“He's a *boy*,” I told her. “I thought I made it clear, I'm not into boys.”

“Yeah, you made it clear. Over and over and over again,” Mackenzi said. “Methinks the lady doth protest too much.”

“Fuck off,” I told her. “It's not like that.”

Mackenzi brushed her hip against mine as she pushed past me airily. “Whatever you say, Tiff...”

I looked in the refrigerator but saw nothing, more wanting to hide my crimson face than anything else. I suddenly found myself devoid of any appetite.

* * * * *

Any lingering thoughts of Mackenzi's teasing accusation or any feelings for Jeff outside the platonic realm quickly fled the next morning. Cynthia, looking glamorous without a hair out of place despite the early hour and probably a sleepless night in the lab, waited at my door when I clicked off the alarm.

“Cynthia? Everything okay?” I mumbled sleepily.

“I got back test results,” she said. “Could you get dressed and meet me downstairs in the lab, please?”

I rubbed my eyes. “I'm supposed to be down there for a scan after breakfast,” I slurred.

“Right away, please, Tiffany,” she said. “It's important.”

Wordlessly, I slipped into a robe and flip-flops and made my way through the darkened house to the basement lab. Lights shone from expensive equipment and multiple flatscreen monitors,

blinking as they generated and digested their precious data. Cynthia stood in front of one of the huge lab refrigerators, backlit by the garish lights inside that illuminated the racks of samples.

“What's going on, Cynthia? You're scaring me,” I told her.

“It's your weight gain,” she said. “Come here, look at this.” She gestured me over to a computer screen nearby.

“What am I looking at?” I asked.

“This is a computer model of the modified cells I implanted inside you,” she explained. “This is an alpha cell. Basically a red blood cell that I changed to take up your Y-chromosomes and transport them safely to the extraction implant in your neck. This next one is a beta cell. They are also based on red blood cells, and they go around changing the receptor sites on your existing cells. Training them to respond to estrogen and progesterone instead of testosterone. To make your cells respond to female hormones instead of male hormones. Those two cells are functioning exactly the way I designed them to. The problem is here.”

She pointed to a third model, a green wire-frame which rotated slowly. “These are the gamma cells. Instead of basing them on modified red blood cells, I used modified white blood cells.”

“What's the difference?”

“Red blood cells transport oxygen in your blood, then take up carbon dioxide,” Cynthia explained. “White blood cells are part of your body's immune response. They attack foreign bodies like bacteria and prevent infection. I chose them because they only activate when they're summoned, like when you get a cut. I didn't want them to be active unless they were needed.”

“What do the gamma cells do?”

Cynthia cleared her throat. “You understand that when I take away the Y-chromosome, I have to stimulate the cell that I took it from to clone the remaining X-chromosome. It will essentially transform you into an exact genetic copy of your mother, over time. I use a special protein that I engineered to make your cells divide ahead of schedule and propagate the new XX configuration. I tell your cells to start reproducing right away as female.”

“Okay, I follow,” I told her. “Last time you extracted, you said my body was around 10% female. What does this have to do with the gamma cells?”

“As you change, your body is going to lose mass. Bones, muscles, that kind of thing. Think about your own mother. You'll be her genetic twin, so you have to lose every inch you were taller than she was, every pound you were heavier. Make sense?”

“Mm-hm.”

“So, let's say that a group of your bone cells in your thigh get propagated. They're female, now.

Your thigh will start to shrink to become the same length as your mother's. That extra bone, it has to go someplace. It doesn't just disappear.”

“So the gamma cells come in and attack it.”

Cynthia smiled. “Smart girl,” she said. I still felt the warm glow of being referred to as *girl* as she continued. “The gamma cells are *supposed* to carry it to your digestive tract. Best way to get rid of it is to dump it with the waste your body already generates.”

“So, I poop it out,” I said, and got a curt nod for confirmation.

“I should have foreseen this,” she said. “White blood cells are designed to attack foreign invaders to the blood. Like genetically modified white blood cells. Your gamma cells are destroying one another. Meaning there are very few remaining to carry off the waste products of all this cellular remodeling. And the excess biomass is building up in your body, causing you to gain weight.”

“Oh,” I said, poking at my expanding belly. “This is bones and muscle?”

“And nerves and fat tissue and everything your body is ridding itself of,” Cynthia concluded. “The most recent scan shows that most of that waste mass seems to be collecting in your adipose tissue – your fat cells. But once that room fills up, it won't be long before something breaks loose into your bloodstream. That will result in something terrible – a heart attack, a stroke, a pulmonary embolism...”

“None of those sound very fun,” I jested feebly. “So, what do we do about it?”

She tapped a vial of cloudy liquid at her elbow. “I came up with this,” she said. “It's a version of the gamma cell, but it's activated. Meaning, it doesn't wait to attack when it's called. It hits your bloodstream on the offensive. I've engineered it to only last about four hours.”

“Why so short a time?” I asked.

“If it stays active longer, it's going to attack everything,” she told me. “It's non-specific. Sure, it will get rid of that excess biomass and keep it from forming a dangerous embolism, but it will also attack everything else.”

She held up another, larger container of clear fluid. “I came up with this stuff, to protect things like your skin and retinas, your hair follicles, the lining of your lungs and stomach, the myelin on your nerves,” she said. “To keep these super-gamma cells from blinding you or causing you to go bald, or shred your digestive tract.”

I grinned. “That was nice of you.”

“But it won't protect things like higher brain function,” she said. “The gamma cells will attack your brain, too. No, we can't risk taking a high enough dose to fix the problem in a hurry. We'll have to administer these new gammas in very small doses over a period of months, as well as the

preventative.”

She took my hands in hers. “This is all my fault,” she told me. “I'm so sorry, Tiffany.”

I hugged her. “I'm not dead yet, Cynthia,” I said into her sable hair. “We can fix this.”

“You're an angel,” she told me. She sniffed back a tear, genuinely touched.

“But hey – won't these new gammas also mess up the alphas and the betas?” I asked.

“Yes,” she said flatly.

“Well, that's no good at all,” I said. “We can't get Jeff off track. He's got as much riding on this as I do. How can we protect your alphas and your betas so we can keep on fixing Jeff?”

Cynthia goggled, open-mouthed. “You mean – I assumed we wouldn't be moving forward with harvesting your Y-chromosomes,” she stammered. “I assumed the risk – I thought this was over.”

“Not a chance,” I said. “Still gotta fix that little runt.”

“I can infuse you with a much higher dose of the alphas and betas,” she said. “The new gammas can't kill them all. If we give you a massive dose, then the harvest should continue at the same pace it is now after the losses.”

I pushed up the sleeve of my robe. “Hit me, doc.”

* * * * *

The next week we spent in crisis mode. I gained close to forty pounds in a very short amount of time, causing me to resort to “fat clothes” just to keep myself covered. I opted for Goodwill instead of anything nice, since I didn't know how much my weight might fluctuate. Drawstrings and elastic became my best friends. Every morning, she pumped me full of alpha and beta cells to speed up my loss of Y-chromosomes and push me further into femininity, all the while stockpiling the precious genetic material for her ailing son. To counter the destructive buildup of waste in my body, Cynthia needed new ways of delivering the protective medication and the super-aggressive gamma cells.



I opted for Goodwill instead of anything nice

She gave me a liter-and-a-half bottle of chalky-tasting fluid to drink every morning to give me the protectant mixture which would guard my sensitive tissues from the vagaries of the gamma cells, and delivered my small doses of the short-lived gammas by way of electronic cigarette vapor. I lounged around the house, too heavy to do more than just the lightest exercise, smoking from the vaporizer (which I had to do outside, in case Jeff or Mackenzi inhaled gamma cells from my secondhand vape) and guzzling the protectant, which I found to be palatable if mixed with tropical punch Kool-Aid. And I slowly adjusted to the borderline obesity of my body. I didn't much care what I looked like, for the most part, I just wanted to be a functional girl. I never really spared much thought to being pretty or sexy, focusing only on the opportunity to not be male any more and being thankful for that. Besides, lots of people in America were fat. After several years on the streets, that extra body weight seemed almost like a badge of honor, even though it derived not from an excess of food or lack of exercise, but an unfortunate byproduct of the futuristic medical treatment I underwent.

Even with the changes in my body, and the exhaustion and digestive problems and muscle tremors that came along with them, I managed to stay positive. My hair grew longer, for one thing – the protectant I drank every day also kept my hair vitamins from being absorbed by other parts of my body as much – enough to pull back into a small stub of a ponytail. The protectant also gave me smooth, blemish-free skin. Lots of things to be grateful about, not the least of which was having friends like Mackenzi and Jeff to keep me company. Jeff never looked at me like a freak, and even his teasing bore the deep gratitude and honor of what I did for him. His own treatments began to show, as well – he filled out a little, and grew about two inches in height. A little peach-fuzz began to dust his upper lip and his shaky tenor began to deepen a

little.

I only just finished vomiting into the sink in the kitchen – no telltale red, which meant my protectant mixed with Kool-Aid stayed down, just not the oatmeal I recently finished – and rinsed my mouth, softly cursing the war between these engineered cells in my body. I stood, wiping my mouth, and jumped a little to find the lanky figure of Jeff leaning against the counter next to me.

“Tiff, man, I'm really sorry about this,” he said softly, no trace of mockery in his voice.

“Forget it,” I said, waving dismissively. “You sign up for experimental medicine, you take your chances. Besides, we're both getting what we want from the bargain.”

“I guess so,” he said. “I don't have to like what it's doing to you.”

“You should think about what it's doing to *you*, there, cowboy,” I teased. “Am I hallucinating, or is that muscle definition on your arms I'm seeing?”

He flexed an arm. “Yeah. Working out never used to produce results, but now...”

I felt the lean, hard muscle of his bicep appreciatively – maybe a bit *too* appreciatively, but I didn't let those thoughts intrude if only to spite Mackenzi – and smiled. “Coming along nicely. When I got out of the Corps, I had a body like a bronze fucking god. You have that potential, if you put your mind to it.”

He laughed suddenly. “Wow,” he commented. “It's kind of amazing, Tiff. You say things like 'being in the Corps' or 'living on the streets' and it hits me that you had this whole other life before this. I don't think about you as anything other than a girl. A girl who's saving my life.”

“That's kind of what I'm going for, dummy,” I told him.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Look, um... boy-girl shit aside, I feel like I can do more to say 'thank you' for everything you're doing.”

“You don't have to...”

He cut me off with a raised hand. “I want to,” he forestalled. “I can't do much, but hey – you mentioned that you wanted to see the new Bourne movie. Let me treat you. Mackenzi says you haven't been out of this house in ages. Let me take you to the movies. It's the very least I can do.”

I bit my bottom lip, then stopped myself angrily because it numbered among Mackenzi's “tells” for when a girl liked a boy in “that way.” I thought for a second, then grinned. “Sure, why not. It's not a date, though.”

He looked confused. “Who said anything about a date?”

"Mackenzi hasn't been riding your ass about that? She's been giving me a whole raft of shit about it," I told him. "Always giving me hell about standing too close to you, giving off all these signals..."

He snorted laughter. "Like I would know if you were hitting on me."

He read my confused look and laughed harder. "I've spent my entire life in hospitals. I wouldn't know a date if it bit me on the ass, Tiff. I've never so much as held a girl's hand. Shit, my body's so messed up that I never even got my first boner until I was seventeen. It scared the shit out of me."

I broke up in nervous laughter. "I'm sorry," I giggled. "I shouldn't laugh. That's terrible."

"Of course you should laugh," he said with a crooked grin. "It's fucking funny. Look, we can go this afternoon. I'll get tickets online. You don't even have to sit next to me if you don't want."

I punched his arm lightly. "Why wouldn't I sit with you?" I said. "Get one thing straight, Jeff. I may not want to jump your bones, but you're my friend. I don't bail on my friends."

He tapped the little extraction disc on the back of my neck. "Yeah, I figured that out on my own."

"Mackenzi can think whatever she wants," I said. "I like you. You're a really cool, down-to-earth guy and you always make me laugh. Why wouldn't I want to hang out with you?"

He dropped his gaze, a little abashed. "Sorry. I overreacted."

"No worries," I said. "Go get tickets. I gotta take a shower. And thanks for asking."

I made my way upstairs – my feet felt leaden – and stripped off my clothes, tossing them in the little white hamper next to the bathroom door. I ducked under the glorious hot water of the shower and slumped against the tiles, letting the heat and pressure of the water knead sore muscles.

My mind wandered as I felt myself relax. Dating. Relationships. Damn Mackenzi anyway for putting those stupid ideas in my head. I only began acclimatizing to the idea of blouse buttons being on the other side, and here she comes teasing me for liking a boy. I felt no sexual attraction to Jeff. If anybody, I felt sexual attraction to *her*. I never spared a thought to Jeff's lanky body, or his crooked boyish smile, or the way the muscles slid beneath his skin as I felt his bicep...

My eyes popped open. *Oh, for fuck's sake, I thought angrily. This is Jeff you're thinking about. Scrawny little Jeff with the gap between his teeth. You like Mackenzi's boobs, not his biceps. Why would you even think about something like that? Mackenzi got in your head, that's all. You're not attracted to Jeff. No way. You're gonna be a lesbian when all of this is over. You have no interest in some guy touching you, or you touching him.*

The feel of the lean, sinewy muscle sliding beneath Jeff's skin as I kneaded his bicep flashed

through my head once more before I squashed it angrily. I knew myself well enough to know that trying to banish a thought only made that thought more intrusive. I decided to change the subject entirely in my mind, think about something completely non-related, clear my brain of anything related to the topic.

What am I going to wear? As I took mental inventory of my closet, I refused to entertain the slightest glimmer of a thought that maybe I obsessed about my outfit for the next twenty minutes because I might, just possibly, want to look nice for Jeff.

* * * * *

I settled on a pink t-shirt dress which covered over the worst of my flab, pulled my hair into a ponytail and gave myself a light, daytime look with my makeup. I even ventured into some two-inch heels – my hours and hours of practice left me confident enough to go out in public and not worry about falling flat on my face or breaking an ankle. Jeff met me downstairs and hustled me along, barely giving me a chance to sling my purse over one arm, complaining about being late and missing the trailers. It hit me suddenly – I did a very girly thing, making him wait for me to finish getting ready like that. The more I tried to make this *not* a date, the more it turned out like one.



What am I going to wear?

Luckily, by the time we got to the theater and found our seats, any lingering doubts had fled. We whispered back and forth through the trailers and the action-packed movie, exchanging comments like true action-movie nerds and thoroughly enjoying ourselves. The world seemed to melt away as we lost ourselves in the fast pace of the film, watching Matt Damon kick legions

of ass and silently cheering him on. We never even noticed our hands gravitate together and our fingers interlace over the course of the two-hour film. And when we did notice, we exchanged a significant glance, a wordless conversation ending in a mutual decision of *fuck it. Let everybody think what they want.* Having my hand in his, and his in mine, just seemed natural. No stress or misgiving, just this logical expression of how we liked one another.

We walked out of the theater, a little nervous about expressing any kind of affection for one another but also glad we had. To his credit, Jeff never moved to put an arm around me or anything that might ruin the comfortable place we found. We perused the “coming soon” posters in the lobby for a while, then walked along the concourse of the attached strip center, peering in windows at things we neither wanted or needed. Without saying so, neither of us wanted to head home just yet.

I found a little secluded alcove and took my dose of gamma from my e-cig, blowing out clouds of cherry-flavored vapor. I mentioned to Jeff that the vape mostly served to dry out my mouth and make me crave a real cigarette – one of those special treats from my days living on the streets. Jeff smiled and led me into a little convenience store, where I bought a pack of skinny super-slim “girly” cigarettes and a disposable lighter. I puffed contentedly on one as we walked along, deep in conversation about the entire run of Bourne movies we'd seen – I missed a few in the middle, homeless veterans didn't get to go to a lot of movies – when a sudden searing cramp ran up my abdomen, nearly doubling me over.

“Tiff, you okay?” Jeff asked, holding me up and assisting me to a bench where I could lean.

“Damn, that really hurts,” I said, gritting my teeth. “Like a cramp, but something different. Like something's tearing. Oh, Jesus. Wow.”

“Let's get you back,” he said. “Mom can figure this out. You wait here, I'll bring the car around.”

I nodded, eyes squeezed shut in pain, and waited breathlessly on the bench until Jeff pulled up in a chirp of tires. He and a few helpful bystanders walked me to the passenger's door and situated me gently in the front seat. I tried to breathe my way through the pain, like I'd done in Basic back in the Marines, as Jeff shattered traffic law after traffic law to get me home in record time.

The cramps subsided a bit by the time I slid onto the exam table downstairs in the lab. I expected deep scans, blood tests, all kinds of hardcore science from Cynthia. Instead, she just looked at my lower abdomen and grinned.

“What's wrong?” I asked nervously.

“Nothing,” she said. “You've started exterior remodeling.”

“Exterior remodeling? Like, new siding and gutters?” I tried to joke halfheartedly, hissing in pain.

“As in, your genitalia are changing,” she said. She gave me a quick injection which eased the pain greatly, then stood me up and patted my shoulder, pressing a kiss into my cheek. “Go upstairs and look for yourself. You'll be pleased, I promise.”

With the lessening of the pain, the stairs became a much less daunting prospect, allowing me to disengage from Jeff's constant help and finally chase him away as I shut the door. I shucked out of the hospital gown and pulled on a purple sweater, lit another of the skinny chick cigarettes I'd bought and plopped down in front of my floor mirror, legs spread wide and propped up on my elbows, peering intently. Laying down, the bulky mass of my belly spread out and I could see the little tuft of brownish-red hair between my legs. On top of a mound. A real mound, not just a fat roll, but the beginnings of an actual *mons veneris*.



On top of a mound.

Below that, my scrotum seemed to have stretched, parting in the middle to form two bulbous lips. My penis, that hated organ, had shrunk considerably and was being drawn downwards. The urinary meatus – the “pee hole” – now resided midway down the shaft. Still recognizably male, but no doubt of where things were headed. The cramps I felt earlier probably meant some part of my anatomy forced itself upwards, forming what would become a uterus. An actual womb. Even though everything just looked deformed and weird, the changes in my anatomy stood out in my mind as the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Not a pussy yet – *a proto-pussy*, I thought laughingly – but it wouldn't be long. Not long.

I dragged happily on my cigarette, laying back on my little circular pink rug and blowing a cloud of stale smoke towards the ceiling. For the first time since this science-fiction thrill ride began, I finally felt it. In my bones, I felt it.

I'm not a boy anymore.

LIFE IN THE THORNE HOUSE kept me on my toes, that was for damned sure. Hot on the heels of the new and joyous formation of my very own pussy, I started experiencing menstrual cramps for the very first time. I didn't yet have a formed cervix to allow any of the primordial uterine tissue out of my body, so I had to undergo a day surgery in Cynthia's private hospital to let it out or risk dying from endometriosis in a few weeks. I lay in a bed, looking out a window overlooking a manicured garden, when Cynthia, Mackenzi and Jeff came in bearing balloons and a big stuffed bear.

"How are you feeling?" Jeff blurted out before anyone could greet me. He looked concerned and sleepless, but his own body transformation proceeded undaunted. Wide shoulders developed to frame a nicely broad chest; he gained another inch or two of height and about twenty pounds of muscle mass. Jeff looked on track to be a real bruiser by the time the smoke cleared. I surveyed him with a Marine's eye and judged he would be cranking out push-ups and five-mile runs in no time. I cast a sad eye down at the rounded belly tenting up my hospital gown and the flabby legs beneath it. *Maybe I should join him on those five-milers*, I thought frustratedly.

"I'm okay. A little sore," I confessed.

"We've missed you at home," Mackenzi told me, stooping to kiss my cheek. "The place is boring without you."

"Aww, that's sweet," I told her fondly.

"Everything went well," Cynthia told me, looking up from where she perused my chart on a tablet computer. "You should be out of here in a day."

"Sounds good," I said. "I can only take so much daytime TV."

"Cabin fever?" Jeff asked.

"Oh, yeah," I confirmed.

"Well, that leads me to what I wanted to ask you," he said, coloring a little. "I've been taking college coursework online, just like you. But now that I'm actually starting to get a little bit stronger, I've been doing some thinking. I talked it over with Mom and she's decided it's okay. I think I'm actually gonna go to college. Y'know, classes and stuff."

"Very cool," I told him.

"Well, that's the thing," he said. "I'm not really comfortable in public. Haven't had a lot of social interaction with anyone, much less guys my own age. So I wanted to ask you if you would like to come to college with me. Kinda look out for me, give me a crash course in socializing."

“College? Me?” I asked. “I’d probably cramp your style.”

“I don’t have a style to cramp, Tiff,” he said. “It would be a huge favor for me, and now that you’re girly enough to go out in public and pass, it might be a good opportunity for you.”

“It would be a *great* opportunity,” Mackenzi corrected.

“What do you think?” Jeff asked hopefully.

I turned to Cynthia. “It’s been medical emergency after medical emergency for me lately,” I told her. “You think it’s safe for me to be away from your lab?”

“For the few hours a day you’ll be gone, I think it will be safe enough,” she said. “You know I’d prefer it if the two of you stayed where I can keep both eyes on you every second, but Mackenzi is right. You have to get out there, meet people. And the school is only ten minutes away. I can get to either of you in plenty of time if something goes wrong.”

I playfully punched Jeff’s shoulder. “Looks like you have a college buddy, then.”

* * * * *

The irony of being the “expert” in the relationship with Jeff outside the mansion did not escape me. I’d enlisted straight out of high school and never given much thought to academics. I didn’t even panhandle near college campuses, because the students there never had any money to spare. But compared to Jeff’s wide-eyed look of near-terror at the bustles of students at the registrar, the bursar and the bookstore, I probably had it all figured out.



"Looks like you have a college buddy, then."

Between the two of us, we managed to find our classes without too much bother and get all our books purchased for the semester from the syllabi handed out. We managed a few short social interactions, mostly with tour guides and orientation volunteers who were expected to be nice to us. Jeff came across a little awkward and shy, but likeable. I noticed more than a few girls who gave him and his rapidly-developing body a considering second glance, and swallowed the sharp stab of jealousy that rose in my throat each time. *I don't like him like that! Why should I care who looks at his ass and who doesn't? Get over it!* I thought angrily. But no amount of self-recrimination or reminding myself of my sexual orientation could keep that envy from shuddering through me each time a girl spoke to Jeff. The frustration and confusion rose to such a level that I stormed right past Mackenzi when we arrived home and straight into my room, sprawling across the bed.

"What's wrong?" Mackenzi asked softly from my doorway a few seconds later.

"Nothing."

"Uh-huh, I can see that," she said. I felt the mattress shift as she settled onto the edge of it. Her soft hand stroked my hair and sent goosebumps across my shoulders. "C'mon, you can tell me."

I groaned and buried my face in the thick comforter. "I put a lot of stock in knowing who I am, Mac," I told her through gritted teeth. "I *need* to know who I am. Inside, I mean. Even when everything about my body is changing by the minute, I've had that to hold on to."

"You're pretty self-aware," she told me. "More so than a lot of people I've met. What happened?"

"Why *now*?" I asked no one in particular. "Why at this particular moment in my life?"

"Tiff, you have to tell me or I can't..."

I rolled over and drummed my fists on the mattress. "I like him, okay?" I hissed angrily at the ceiling. "You were right, and I was too proud to admit it, and now it's here and every time a girl talks to him I want to punch her in the fucking throat and goddamn you for being right. I fucking like him."

She stroked my forehead and her voice surpassed tenderness. "Oh, honey, I know that. I've known that for weeks," she said softly, without a hint of judgement.

"Well, I didn't *want* to know it," I groaned, hot tears forming at the corners of my eyes. "Boys don't make me feel that way. Boys have *never* made me feel that way."

"Sweetheart, I had a roommate in college named Sarah," she told me. "She was my closest friend, the person I trusted most in the world. Like a sister and more. I couldn't even tell you the series of events that led to our sleeping together the first time. It just all clicked together and made *perfect* sense. I didn't even consider that I was in love with another woman. It never entered into the argument. I was just in love. I loved this *person*. I never even thought about what gender she was."

"So, you're gay?" I asked her.

"Not a bit," she told me. "Love boys. Never been with a woman since. But it had nothing to do with what gender she was or what gender I was. She was perfect for me, and I was perfect for her, and that's all love cares about."

"I'm not in love," I growled.

"I don't know anything else that can make someone this crazy," she replied.

"I had opportunities," I confessed, from the darkest place in my soul. "On the streets. People – men, I mean – pay for guys like me. They like that we're desperate. It turns them on, knowing that we're straight and we're doing those things for money."

"Did you ever..?"

I shook my head. "Too proud," I told her. "I went hungry instead, or slept in the cold. I saw the looks on the faces of the guys who caved in and went through with it. Something inside them was broken, and it never fully healed."

"Do you feel broken right now?" she asked me.

“Straight up? I don't know what the hell I feel,” I told her sadly. “I don't know how to be around him. I mean, I want my friend. I don't want to fuck anything up.”

Mackenzi giggled a little. “Tiff, you saved his *life*. You couldn't fuck up with him if you tried.”

“I don't want it to be about that,” I said. “I... I don't talk about this much. Being on the streets. I don't like remembering it. You're out there, day after day, scrambling for a hot meal and a dry place to sleep, maybe to get high or drunk, to keep somebody from stealing your stuff. That's your life. That's what your days are. And all around you, there's these people, walking through those streets where you live, and they don't see you. They look right through you, like you're some kind of fucking ghost. After a while, you start to wonder if you're even visible. Like you even exist.”

“That sounds terrible,” Mackenzi told me.

“It's not. At times, it's even comforting. But you start to believe it. And I come here, and this woman offers to make all my dreams come true, and... and then I meet Jeff, and he actually *sees* me. I'm not a ghost. Not to him. I don't think anybody has ever really seen me before like that. I mean, you're a friend and I love you, Mac, but this relationship started because Cynthia paid you to help me. There's no way for me to know if you ever would have seen me without that paycheck there. Sometimes, Cynthia talks to me or looks at me like I'm just proteins and lab values. Jeff... Jeff has *no* incentive to like me. He could have gone through this whole thing and never even known my name. He chose to see me. He *wanted* to. He's the first one.”

“I think I understand,” she told me.

“So what do I do?” I asked her, weeping. “I... oh, dammit, you're right again... I love him. And now, he sees me, and all he sees is this fat lump...”

“No way,” Mackenzi interrupted hotly. “I'm not gonna let you do that to yourself. Jeff couldn't care less about what you weigh because he knows *exactly* why you weigh that much. And he's better than that.”

“But I have to *compete* now,” I told her. “You should've seen some of those girls today on campus.”

“I've seen plenty of them. I've watched them go home with the guy *I* wanted a million times,” she said. “Believe me, honey, you don't need to be a Victoria's Secret model to get the guy you want. You have to be direct, and honest, and...”

“Tell me the Victoria's Secret thing doesn't help,” I challenged.

She laughed and held up her hands. “Okay, you win,” she said. “It *does* help. But it's not everything. Start paying a little more attention. Find out what Jeff likes. Find some shared interests. Learn what gets him going and then participate. It's not hard, and it doesn't mean sacrificing yourself or your own interests. You'd probably be surprised what all the two of you have in common. And stick close to him. The more time you spend with him, the harder it will be

for him to imagine being without you.”

I squeezed her hand. “I like it when you make sense,” I said.

“I don't do it often, and only for very special people,” she said. “Now get yourself cleaned up, you're a mess. Lunch will be ready in a minute.”

“I'll be right down,” I said, fishing my compact mirror from my purse.

* * * * *

I took Mackenzi's advice to heart and spent as much time as I could with Jeff, around Cynthia's medical schedule of tests and scans and blood work and our courseload from school. I hit the gym as often as I could, trying to shift the incremental losses and gains in my weight in a vain attempt to improve my body, but the drugs Cynthia pumped into me kept me from making any significant changes. I only just finished a three-mile waddle on the downstairs treadmill and walked into the kitchen, toweling oily sweat from my face, when I heard Jeff's deepening voice hooting madly from the other room.

I peered around the doorway and saw him, shaking his fists in the air as he watched a college basketball game, cheering for one of the teams. Encouraged by Mackenzi's advice, I scampered upstairs and logged into my computer, reading as much as I could about college basketball until I considered myself competent enough to discuss it. By the time I emerged for dinner, I considered myself well-armed.

“Which game were you watching earlier?” I asked him.

“North Carolina versus Boston College,” he said. “Great game. Tarheels pulled it out in the last fifteen seconds. You like basketball?”

I nodded. “Never got much of a chance to watch it, but yeah. I like it.”

His face lit up. “I'm actually almost to the point where I can play,” he said. “Ever since I was little, I dreamed of playing basketball. Hopefully next year I can try out for the team.”

“You'll make it,” I told him.

“Hey – there's a game at school on Friday. You wanna go?” he asked.

“Sounds like fun,” I answered, leaping for joy inside.

The next few days before the game crawled by as I agonized over what to wear and how to act. I even started a handwritten list of conversation topics and watched old recordings of Final Four games so I wouldn't sound like an idiot when I talked to him. It dawned on me that I wasn't following the exact letter of Mackenzi's advice – not the part about not sacrificing my own interests and personality – but this was the first real hope I'd felt in years. Friday afternoon after biology, I hurried home and crammed myself into the tightest pair of jeans I owned and

spent a good hour and a half on my hair and makeup.

I pushed my hip against his as we sat on the bleachers together and cheered for the home team, trying to maintain an interest in a game that consisted mainly of sweaty men running back and forth across the floor to the high-pitched squeak of shoes, but the spectacle of all the cheering students and the music and the smells from the concession stand made up for the boredom. That, and being close to Jeff. Now that I'd surrendered to my feelings and admitted them, just his proximity brought a feeling on me both calming and thrilling at the same time.

The referees finally whistled halftime. "I'm starving," Jeff announced. "You want something from the concession stand?"

"Just something to drink," I told him. I tapped my wristwatch. "Hey, I gotta head outside and hit my vape, I'm overdue. Meet me outside?"

He nodded, already threading his way into the thickening crowd around the stands and restrooms. I shouldered through and stepped out the door, finding a secluded spot and taking a few deep puffs off of my e-cig to kick-start the metabolic processes governed by Cynthia's gamma cells. I lost myself a little, watching clouds of moths in their crazy orbits around the sidewalk lamps, finally noticing that a good ten or fifteen minutes had passed and still no Jeff.

I pushed my way back inside and angled through the crowd towards the snack stands. I found Jeff, leaning against a post and talking to one of the cheerleaders, who offered him a flirtatous smile. Thoughtlessly, I saw Jeff smilingly pass her the bottle of water he ostensibly purchased for me.



. "You want something from the concession stand?"

The cheerleader offered him a sultry smile as she accepted. I nudged closer, coming into earshot.

"It's really cool that you're here," the cheerleader was saying. "Where did you study overseas?"

I recognized Jeff's "cover story" for his sudden appearance at college and lack of knowledge of any of the local high schools. "Belgium, mostly, some in France, some in Germany," he said.

"Ooh!" the cheerleader giggled, touching up her hair. "*Parlez-vous français?*"

"*Mais oui, un peu,*" Jeff replied.

"So listen, there's a party after the game at my friend Rebecca's house," the cheerleader told him, sidling a little closer under the pretense of the loudness of the crowd. "You think you might wanna show up? There's a couple kegs."

"I dunno," Jeff said. "I'm here with somebody."

The cheerleader's face betrayed mock-disappointment. "Oh, you have a girlfriend."

"No, just a friend," he corrected. "But I have to get her home, I'm her ride. There she is, right there. Hey, Tiff. This is Jennifer."

“Hi,” I grunted.

“Oh, she's... cute,” Jennifer said, disdain dripping from the final word. “Well, of course, she's welcome to come too. I'm sure she'll have a good time.”

“No, thanks,” I said, trying to swallow my instant dislike.

Jennifer leaned close and fished a pen from her little designer purse. She pressed her lithe body against Jeff as she wrote an address on his hand. I noticed him shift his feet subtly and angle his pelvis away from her.

Oh my God, she made him hard! I realized in shock. He's turned on! I wanted to be the one to do that! Damn Mackenzi and her fucked up advice, anyway! Damn her! I can make him like me, sure, but it's all for nothing if I can't make him want me, too!

“What do you think, Tiff, you wanna go to a party?” he asked, snapping me from my self-hating reverie and back to the crowd noise and salty smell of concession-stand nachos.

I tried to keep naked hatred from my voice. “No, I'm gonna head home,” I said. “I'll take an Uber or something, you stay and do whatever you want. I'm not feeling good.”

“Oh, that's too bad,” Jennifer said with an airy mock-sincerity and a look of triumph that made me want to stab out her eyes.

Jeff's eyes became serious. “Everything okay?” he asked, touching my arm.

I shied away from his touch, even though it sent waves of comfort through me. “Yeah, everything's fantastic,” I said. “I'm just really tired. I'll see you at home.”

I left before he could answer, leaving him with the predatory cheerleader sipping my water and shooting a smug, self-satisfied smile at my retreating back.

* * * * *

The sizeable tumbler of vodka I chugged the instant I came in the back door did not help my stealth. I bumped and stumbled my way up the stairs, zigzagging crazily between bitter tears and angry growls.

“So *that's* the kind of girl you like? Fuck you,” I muttered to the empty air. “I was a goddamned Marine. I can tear that skinny bitch's throat the fuck out before she knows what happened.”

I pushed my way into Jeff's darkened room. I didn't really know what I intended to do in there, but I knew it would be something vindictive. Piss in his bed or something. I'd figure it out when I got there.

I looked over the small but tidy room. A chest of drawers with a small mirror on top, a few items of masculine jewelry alongside deodorant and a brush and comb. A rumpled single bed with a

copy of *Game of Thrones* on the bedside table next to an alarm clock and half-empty glass of water. A small desk, strewn with papers and college textbooks. A wastebasket beside, filled with discarded paper and wadded tissues...

I grinned. "So this is where you do the nasty," I slurred, slumping gracelessly into his desk chair. "Let's see what kind of girl you jack off to, you little pervert."



"So *that's* the kind of girl you like? Fuck you,"

I searched around on his hard drive for a few minutes, my eyes focusing with difficulty, before finding a folder labeled "Porn" hidden a few levels down. I opened the first dozen or so pictures in the file with a sloppy swoop of the mouse.

Every single picture, just variations on a theme. I opened more of them, finding only pictures of skinny platinum blondes with huge silicone breasts bobbing above plank-flat stomachs. Clinging, barely there clothing and the highest of high platform heels. Fake hair extensions, fake eyelashes, fake nails, fake tans, fake boobs, fake lips... it seemed that Jeff only stroked his cock to pictures of surgically-modified bimbos. The videos were the same, more huge-breasted blondes. Something in my mind seemed to digest the reality whole, sinking into me in a single thought: *this is what Jeff wants*. I looked down critically at myself: the rolls of fat, the flat chest, the thin lips and double chin, the short reddish hair and the frumpy clothes. Even my makeup was understated, not the overdone eyes and frosted pink lips from the pictures. Everything about me flew in the face of the kind of woman Jeff desired.

"This is a test," I breathed drunkenly. "A crossroads. I can either stay the way I am and spend the rest of my life watching Jeff go off and fuck girls like that cunt Jennifer, or I can take a chance.

Show some fucking backbone and take a risk, right?"

I closed the pictures on the computer and stood unsteadily, gazing at my pudgy face in the little mirror above Jeff's dresser. "What's it gonna be, Marine? You gonna let some predatory little slut poach your guy, or are you gonna take a fucking stand and fight?"

I lurched towards the stairs. "You're goddamn right I'm gonna fight. *Semper fucking fi.*"

* * * * *

Early morning light painted pale stripes across the breakfast table as Cynthia came in, still forming her hair into a perfect French twist. Jeff wolfed down an enormous portion of eggs and sausage, watching the morning news, and Mackenzi poured Cynthia a cup of coffee from the pot.

"Where's Tiffany?" Cynthia asked, looking around. "She has a scan scheduled in a few minutes."

"She's not down yet?" Mackenzi said. "I thought for sure she would be in the gym, or in the lab with you."

"She went home early from the game last night," Jeff said, mouth full. "I didn't see her when I got home."

Cynthia noticed something in the trashcan and stooped to retrieve it. She held an empty Stolichnaya bottle up to the light. "Jeff, did you finish this last night?"

"Not me," Jeff said. "You said no booze."

"Mackenzi?"

"Not me. I guess maybe Tiffany drank it."

Cynthia's eyes widened slightly. "She shouldn't be drinking. I told her not to. Alcohol could have wild reactions with the nanites. I have no idea what it would do," she breathed. Her voice deepened, tinged with the snap of command. "Mackenzi, check upstairs. Jeff, you check the rest of the house and the back. I'll check the lab."

They sprang up, separating into their regions, reacting subconsciously to the tinge of alarm in Cynthia's normally calm, collected voice. Neither Mackenzi nor Jeff managed to turn up a trace of her, only a made bed in her room, when they heard Cynthia's voice come over the household intercom.

"She's here. Lab Storage Room B. Mackenzi, hurry. Jeff, call the hospital and tell them to send the ambulance right away," Cynthia said tersely.

Mackenzi thundered down the stairs two at a time, showing her long-forgotten gymnastics background. She skidded to a stop, a bit breathless, on the slick tiles of Cynthia's lab and braced

herself against the door jambs with her hands.

Tiffany lay sprawled on the floor, profoundly unconscious, with Cynthia next to her taking vital signs and trying to elicit a response. Mackenzi's protégé slumped against one wall against a refrigerator full of medications, chemicals and blood samples, wearing a pink cocktail dress and matching pumps, evening jewelry and with her hair and makeup done extravagantly. Empty, unlabeled bottles lay discarded around her and a foul smell filled the small storage room.

“What happened? What was in those bottles?” Mackenzi said, kneeling next to Tiffany and taking up her limp hand to chafe between her own.

“The gamma cells,” Cynthia breathed. “All of them, a six-month supply. It's supposed to be inhaled, but she ingested, so maybe the stomach acid will mitigate the overdose.”

“Will she be okay?” Mackenzi nearly-wailed.

“I don't know,” Cynthia said. “The gammas, they're attacking everything in her body. The excess biomass is leaching out of her – sweat, mucus, saliva, feces, urine – and I have no idea how much she's lost already, much less how much she's going to lose. I have to shut down the gamma cells.”

“Won't the protectant drink do it?” Mackenzi asked, looking at the refrigerator.

“She poured it down the sink,” Cynthia said, gesturing at a basin on the other wall. “She doesn't want it counteracted. I had no idea she was so dissatisfied with her body. She never mentioned it.”

Jeff sprinted into the doorway. “Ambulance is five minutes out,” he said, breathing hard. “Oh, God, Tiff – Mom, will she be all right?”

“I can't say for sure,” Cynthia said. “I have to get her to the hospital and find a way to turn off the gamma cells in her body before they leave enough of her body intact to save.”

* * * * *

I woke up in a surprisingly good mood. It took a moment to digest my surroundings – the same hospital room I lay in after my last surgery. A strange-looking contraption hummed softly at my bedside, pumping a thick yellowish paste into my arm through an IV. I stared at it curiously, but found myself distracted by the pretty flowers on my bedside table and the talk show on the television mounted to the wall. Not so much the content of the show – some panel show like *The View* or something, but rather the pretty clothes some of the interviewers wore.

A nurse peeked through the door and turned on her heel immediately, returning a few moments later with Cynthia. They checked charts and took vital signs wordlessly. Cynthia finally broke the uncomfortable silence.

“Tiffany, dear, what were you *thinking?*” she said softly, eyes betraying an ocean of worry.

"I dunno," I said thickly. "I don't even remember what happened."

"You overdosed," Cynthia said. "You drank a bottle of vodka and then overdosed on the gamma cells."

"I did?" I asked muzzily. "I don't... I mean, I can't..."

"I managed to shut them down, for the most part," Cynthia said, "but not before they did a huge amount of damage. They've made some irreversible changes to your body, my dear."

"What kind of changes?"

Cynthia sat on the end of my bed and put her warm hand on my knee. "You're in a permanent hypermetabolic state," she said. "Your cells – every cell in your body – is working much, much faster than it should. Most people's basal metabolic rate, their body does enough work in one day just breathing and digesting food to equal a brisk walk around the block. Your body runs at least a marathon a day."

She consulted the tablet computer again. "The gamma cells essentially ruined your digestive system," she said. "I don't know that you will ever be able to eat much of anything again without discomfort for the rest of your life, much less effectively digest what you manage. I'm feeding you externally for now, but that's only temporary." She pointed at the strange humming machine next to the bed.

"I'll need some tests, but I imagine you've lost some immune response and possibly even higher brain function. You may find it very hard to concentrate, or that you become very easily distracted. There might be memory loss, or you may find it very hard to think. I won't know until we assess the damage."

"I'm sorry I put you through this," I told her. "I wish I remembered why." Dimly, like from the bottom of a deep hole, I remembered pictures. Large-breasted blonde women with pouty lips. The images drifted into smoke as soon as they formed.

"I guess we may never know," Cynthia said. "You scared me, honey."

"Will I still be able to help Jeff?" I asked.

"That seems to be the only system in your body that wasn't affected," Cynthia told me. "If anything, the overdose of gamma cells and your heightened metabolism seems to have made the whole process more efficient. Instead of one extraction per day, I'm performing three."

"Well, that's happy news," I said with a smile.

"I suppose," she said. "For now, I'm more concerned with how to provide nutrition for you before you die of starvation."

"I have an idea," I told her. I pointed to the humming machine. "You think that could be

implanted? Like, inside my body?"

Cynthia made a noncommittal grunt, but I could see the wheels turning inside her mind.

"Maybe. It's a possibility. In the meantime, dear, is there anything I can get you?" she asked after a long, considering pause.

I nodded cheerfully. "A cigarette," I told her. "And then a ride home."

* * * * *

Nothing could tamp down the sheer, unfettered joy I felt when I first cast off my covers and took a look at my tiny body. Cynthia told me a lot of numbers and percentages, but the end result told me more. I topped out at five feet one inch tall and weighed ninety-two pounds. Skinny at last!



"Well, that's happy news," I said with a smile.

I spent a lot of time lifting up my shirt and staring at my body in the mirror in my room, counting my ribs and admiring the points of my hips poking beneath my skin. Vanity did prompt me to stuff tissues in my bra – the gamma cells ate up the small breasts I had, leaving me only two tiny little bumps – and a pouting session of *please, please, please* to Mackenzi got me a bottle of hair dye to celebrate. When I walked out of the hospital at the end of that week, puffing happily on a skinny super-slim cigarette with my purse slung under my arm, ready to head out with Cynthia's credit card and buy all new clothes, I couldn't keep a happy spring from my step which bounced my new platinum-blonde locks against my shoulders.

I couldn't quite figure out why I bleached my hair – those strange wispy pictures from deep inside my brain had a lot to do with it – but doing so made me inordinately happy. Even as weird and inconvenient as my life had become, nothing seemed to get me down.

Cynthia had to hook me up to the feeding machine five times a day. If I was even five minutes late for a “meal,” I got weak and woozy and could barely walk. This proved problematic since I'd taken to wearing no less than a four-inch heel wherever I went, and usually a one- or two-inch platform to go with it. Heels were the only way I could figure out to reach top shelves now, I was so tiny and petite. If I got swimmy-headed or weak, the possibility of turning or even breaking an ankle on my skyscraper heels got very high.

The morning supplements – huge pills washed down with water – took me the better part of fifteen minutes to swallow, and made my stomach hurt for about an hour afterwards. Cynthia told me I had really fucked up my digestive tract, and her word proved true. More than just a few bites of food gave me cramps and nausea. I took to snacking throughout the day and not taking full meals. Cynthia demanded I eat protein bars and shakes whenever possible, but I found a preference for fresh fruits and vegetables. They seemed to take less of a toll on my stomach. Any meat more dense than tuna fish tore me in half. I made the transformation to vegetarian seamlessly over the next week or so, and hoped I could find a source of protein that would satisfy Cynthia's dietary demands and allow me to become fully vegan soon. A plant-based diet made the most sense to me.

The few short contacts I had with Jeff stalled quickly beneath a curtain of awkwardness and shame. I think he realized my overdose had something to do with him, but he wasn't sure what and my own memory couldn't fill in any blanks. I did remember being really angry with him, but not why. And my perpetual good mood made it impossible to stay angry with him. After all, he *was* really cute. I couldn't stay mad when he flashed that crooked little boyish smile.

The biggest plus from the overdose was that I got to have my braces off. Something about the bone loss when the gammas attacked let my teeth move pretty freely and painlessly, allowing the braces to do their work in a day or two instead of the usual months. I liked my pretty new smile, all my teeth straight and perfect, but I wanted to get them whitened. For some reason, the thought of “improving” myself like that really appealed to me. I instinctually gravitated to the idea of paying a doctor to make something about me better. It made a bizarre, inexplicable kind of sense to me.

Cynthia wouldn't allow me to go back to school until she had my condition stabilized – it made sense, I could hardly go to classes with an IV pole and the big feeding machine humming at my elbow – but I missed being around people. I found myself chatting with nurses and lab techs and people from the hospital who came to and from the house bearing lab results and samples, just to have some human contact. Strange that I had never really placed much value on conversation and interaction like that before. Just one of the many things that changed about me, I guess.

Cynthia finally managed to come up with a solution to my feeding dilemma. She custom-engineered a new type of cell which would convert carbon dioxide into raw protein which my body could metabolize. Although nothing was tested and a lot of things could go wrong, Cynthia believed it would be my best bet to separate myself from the feeding machine and allow me to

have a life outside the hospital or lab. She tried several times to explain the science to me, but I kept getting lost. I finally pre-empted yet another boring lecture by telling her it didn't matter to me how.

"There is a problem, though," she told me.

"What problem?"

"The custom cells, they are very fragile. They have to be suspended in something like collagen or keratin to keep from collapsing. And one gram of these cells only produces about 0.3 grams of protein per hour. Your body needs much more than that to survive and function," she said.

"So I need a lot of them," I answered, finally getting my head around some of the science.

"With the connective tissue, and the blood supply, and the cells... yes," she said. "A *lot* of them. And I hate to say it, Tiffany, but there's not a whole lot of room left inside you. I thought to implant them along the mesentery – along the track of your small intestine – but I don't think there's enough real estate."

"That doesn't sound like a problem to me," I said. "Just put them someplace else."

Her brow furrowed a bit. "Where else would I put them?"

I offered her a mischevious smile. "Where else?" I giggled. "Boobs, butt and lips!"

"YOU MEAN MAKE THIS SOME kind of a *cosmetic* procedure?" Cynthia asked, a little ashen at my request. "Under the skin?"

"Sure, why not?" I giggled. "I might actually wind up shaped like a girl, for once."

Cynthia rose up as if to protest, but a sudden thought occurred and melted her stern expression into one of consideration. "There's an ample blood supply," she mused, eyes far away. "And there would be room for expansion that something peritoneal wouldn't necessarily allow... Tiffany, are you *sure*?"

"I've been a girl for a while now," I said, taking her hand. "I would *really* like some curves."

Cynthia chuckled. "With the amount of tissue I'd have to implant in you, you'd have some pretty considerable curves, darling," she said.

I rolled my eyes. "Are you gonna make me say it, Cynthia?" I groaned. "Fine. I want great big boobs. Big giant knockers. I want you to implant it all in my chest until I have porn tits."

Cynthia looked stricken. "I don't... you never... Tiffany, why didn't you say something?"

My voice shrank, becoming young and plaintive. "This has never been about me, Cynthia, not ever," I said. "I started because it would let me finally be a girl. But once I met Jeff – this has been about saving his life since the second I met him."

"But there's nothing wrong with wanting things for yourself," Cynthia argued.

"There is if it's the most important thing," I countered. "I didn't ask you for anything because I didn't want to distract from the reason for all of this. Fixing Jeff. And c'mon, look at you. Brilliant doctor, always pushing me to go to school and get a degree – how am I supposed to tell you that I really want you to turn me into some silicone tits-on-a-stick bimbo?"

"Is that what you want?" Cynthia asked.

"Of course it's what I want," I told her. "It just sounded so silly – and *selfish* – to say anything."

She gently chafed my hand between hers. "Tiffany, honey..." her voice broke a little. "I owe you everything. I owe you my child's life. Nothing you want, nothing that would make you happy, is silly or selfish to me. If it's in my power to give..."

"I believe you," I said, interrupting her gently. "But I'm embarrassed about it. I thought that if I became this Barbie doll that I dreamed about, you wouldn't respect me any more. That you..."

"That I what?" Cynthia asked quietly, weeping.

"That you wouldn't want me as a daughter," I whispered.

"Is that how you see yourself?"

I nodded, sobbing quietly.

"My dear girl," she said, sitting on the edge of the bed and stroking my cheek with a warm hand. "How could I not be proud? You are the most courageous human being I have ever known. You've plunged into this unknown head-first without a second's hesitation."

She leaned over and kissed my forehead. "You're the *perfect* daughter."

"Will you still feel that way if I have giant plastic boobs?"

"Of course I will," she laughed. "I'm the one who'll be giving them to you."

"Then I want them," I said firmly. "Big boobs and big inflated pouty lips and a badonk-a-donk butt. Long blonde hair and fake eyelashes and fake fingernails and a fake tan. I want to look like a Barbie doll – I've always wanted to look like that. Not because I want men to want me, because *I* want it. Ever since I was little. I think it will make me happy."

"Then it would be my pleasure," Cynthia said. "Anything for my daughter."

I took her hand between mine and kissed her fingertips. “Thank you, mama.”

* * * * *

Cynthia started work immediately the next morning, starting me on a regimen of special supplements which would supercharge my body's production of keratin, collagen and elastin – all vital components for the implants she worked round-the-clock to develop for me in the lab downstairs. The pill and the water alone stuffed my small, shrunken stomach and obviated the need for me to eat breakfast.



I kept the promise I made to her, though, by eating whatever my broken digestion could tolerate after my morning workout – a few strawberries or a half-container of yogurt. After that, I showered and spent about an hour doing my hair and applying makeup.

Jeff continued his studies at school while I attended my classes online, since my amped-up metabolism combined with my decreased capacity to eat left me weak and dizzy several times during the day. My meager stock of clothing fit my old, much larger body, which left me confined to drawstrings, elastic and belts until I could buy new clothes. I could have gone shopping any time, but I wanted to wait until I had my new “additions” before I spent the money. Buying cute clothes which wouldn't fit around the enormous new tits I would soon have seemed a waste.

It occurred to me how much I enjoyed the life I currently led. Whatever I'd done to my brain during my overdose, it left me perfectly suited for a life of workouts, clothes, hair and makeup. I would read, sometimes, or write in my journal if the mood struck, but mostly I browsed online stores and perfected my skincare regimen and made myself perfectly happy and content. It tickled me to know I emerged from the other end of my ordeal with the ideal trophy wife

mindset.

A part of me mourned that I would never be the brilliant doctor or scientist that Cynthia wanted, but she constantly reminded me that she would be happy however I turned out. With those reassurances buoying my spirits, I allowed myself to be the brainless bimbo that struggled to emerge from inside me. I spent the next week slowly letting go of being the hard-eyed survivor of the streets or the tough veteran Marine, the furtive boy with the terrible secret, all the things that made me hard and unforgiving. I entered a life of softness and vulnerability and quickly found myself in love with it.

It all served to remind me that I had always been meant to be a girl.

A request to Mackenzi yielded a used iPad tablet where I could watch YouTube tutorials about makeup, since I wanted a much sluttier look for myself. I found a few channels which fitted the bill perfectly, and I added a half-hour or so of practice to my morning regimen.



It all served to remind me that I had always been meant to be a girl.

Slowly, I began to upgrade the accoutrements of my life to suit the changes. The mid-range drugstore makeup on my dressing table gave way to high-end M.A.C. cosmetics. My phone – which once only served to connect me to the lab downstairs but now allowed me “selfies” and Facebook and Twitter and Instagram – upgraded from a hand-me-down Android to a sleek new iPhone 7 with a pink case. The cheap platform wedges that I wore to knock around the house surrendered to a stylish pair of nude Louboutin pumps.

Only the gaudy rhinestone Hello Kitty ring, fished from the trash what seemed like an eternity

ago, survived this shift into *serious* girliness. That piece of tacky paste jewelry represented a milestone in my life, and I would always treasure it as though diamonds gave it sparkle. I wore it quite a bit, on my index finger, just to remind me that it was okay now to like pink. To think Hello Kitty was adorable. To prefer a glossy lip to a matte lip. To have a wish list on my computer of bikinis. To read *Vogue*.

I wasn't a freak any more.

I couldn't keep the smile from my face.

* * * * *

Mackenzi leaned over my shoulder on the couch and snaked her arms around me, giving me a friendly squeeze. She tapped the ad for Guess in the copy of *Elle* I perused. "I would look so good in that."

I grabbed her wrist and squeezed, pressing my cheek into hers. "Hey, Mac."

She leapt nimbly over the back of the couch and sprawled beside me. "Got a second?" she asked.

I put the magazine in my lap. "Sure."

"Things have been weird, lately," she said. "I mean, with your overdose and with everything that's been going on. Not that I'm complaining."

"Mm-hmm," I said.

"Anyway, I've been so focused on everything and this has been such a big part of my life, y'know, I looked up and it turns out that you're the only girl I know any more, Tiff," she told me.

"Really?" I said, astonished. "I thought you had tons of girlfriends."

"Not here," she said. "Girls I knew from college, sorority sisters, that kind of thing. I mostly talk to them on Facebook. You're the only girl I know *here* any more."

"That's kinda sad," I giggled.

"It would be if you weren't one of the coolest chicks I know," she countered.

"What brought all this on?" I asked her.

"I needed girl talk. I needed to tell somebody," she said, taking a deep breath. "I met somebody."

My heart leapt up in my chest. I bounced, clapping my hands. "OhmyGawd, Mac, that's great! Tell me everything!" I squealed.

She leaned back and widened her eyes a bit. "I could never tell you weren't always a girl," she

said softly. "There's nothing masculine about you."

"That's sweet 'n' all, baby, but you're dodging," I mock-scolded. "What's his name? Where did you meet him? What's he like? Have you kissed him yet?"

She laughed. "Okay, okay, calm down," Mackenzi told me. "His name is Richard. I met him while I was waiting to get my oil changed. Super romantic, our eyes met across the Jiffy Lube lounge."

"That actually is a *little* romantic," I chided.

"There was a long wait so we just started chatting," she went on. "He works for the State, in the Health Department. His department keeps track of children's immunizations. He was a nurse for a few years before that, worked at the children's hospital."

"Points for the 'good with kids' angle," I pointed out.

"God, Tiff, he's *gorgeous*. I cannot believe he is single," she said. "Imagine, like a Chris Pratt *Guardians of the Galaxy* type but with darker and longer hair. Tall, broad shoulders, he's muscular but he's not *cut*, you know what I mean? Smooth and muscular. He said he runs a lot so he's in really good shape, too."

"Damn," I said, picturing him. I felt very little in the way of sexual arousal at the image, but could appreciate Mackenzi's desire. I felt nothing if I pictured any man other than Jeff. "Nice."

"But honestly, I wouldn't care if he weighed five hundred pounds and had acne," she said. "He is so sweet. Compassionate and sensitive. I don't normally gush to people I just met, but something about him... I wound up telling him my whole life story, right there in the Jiffy Lube."

"And he didn't think you were psycho?"

"Apparently not," Mackenzi said, "because when my car was ready, he grabbed my receipt and wrote his number on it. He said he *never* did shit like that, but there was something about me... Shit, Tiff, I don't even care if it was a bullshit line. I am so into him."

"I couldn't tell," I laughed.

"It didn't seem like it was rehearsed, y'know? He wasn't smooth about it. He seemed really embarrassed and nervous about it."

"Have you called him yet?"

She shook her head. "I'm afraid to," she told me. "I don't want him to think I'm desperate."

I gave her a gentle, playful shove. "Quit that," I told her. "You like him. He obviously likes you. What's the problem? You're not gonna sound desperate, he's gonna get the thrill because you don't feel like fucking around playing stupid games when you could be spending time with him."

“You think?”

“I know,” I shot back. “If he's the kind of guy you want him to be, then he will be comfortable and psyched to have you take the initiative. When I was a guy, I used to dream of meeting a girl who would just *bam* – say what she wanted.”

“So, you think I should just call him?”

“No, I think you should call him and then ask him out,” I said. “Take him someplace interesting.”

“So, *not* Jiffy Lube.”

I snorted. “Not since they changed chefs.”

“God, where should I take him?”

“He's a runner, right? So are you, or you used to be. Ask him to go running with you. One of those pretty, secluded hike-and-bike trails down by the lake. Time it so you'll be out there around sunset, maybe have a little picnic at the end on the hood of your car...”

She squeezed my forearm. “You're good at this,” she told me. “How is it you don't have Jeff, yet?”

“Well, I've been busy,” I said. “Changing genders, almost dying a couple times, learning to walk in heels, fending off starvation now...”

“Excuses, excuses,” she laughed.

“I haven't forgotten,” I told her. “I have some plans. I need to get past this latest crisis, but once I do, then things will move forward.”

“Girl, you should totally write an advice column,” Mackenzi told me.

“Maybe,” I said. “Sounds like that could seriously cut in to my loaf-around-the-house time.”

“You gotta do something, eventually,” she replied.

“Well, I've been thinking about that, too,” I told her. “You know I've been watching all those makeup tutorials and stuff, right?”

“Yeah, you've been really getting into that,” Mackenzi said. “You look great, by the way. I love how you did your eyes.”

“Thanks,” I said, blushing a little. “Well, I really like it. And I'm starting to think I'm good at it. So I've been playing with the idea of getting my certificate. Cosmetology.”

“Really? Makeup?”

“And hair. And nails,” I corrected. “Maybe even something like laser hair removal or waxing, too. I mean, I’ve always been drawn to makeup. Comes from being a little tranny boy. Forbidden fruit, first of all, and then its ability to transform people... there’s something about the idea of doing it professionally, making people look glamorous and beautiful, it just really makes me feel happy.”

“Then you should go for it,” Mackenzi said.

“I dunno, sometimes I feel like I might be letting Cynthia down if I do,” I confessed. “I still feel like the least I could do would be to get an RN and try to have a job in medicine.”

“Cynthia isn’t like that,” Mackenzi said. “She wouldn’t want you to do something you don’t like or aren’t sure about just to please her. She’d want you to make your own destiny.”

“I know you’re right,” I said. “I’m projecting. But I still feel that way.”

“Talk to her,” Mackenzi advised. “I know she’ll tell you what I just did.”

“I will,” I said. “Just not right now. One thing at a time.”

“Okay,” Mackenzi said. “But if you don’t tell Cynthia, then I will. Stuff like that can fester if you leave it alone for too long. Besides, if you become a beautician then I get free haircuts and facials for the rest of my life.”

“Ah, it’s like that, is it?”

“Yeah, it’s like that,” she teased. “Free hairstyling for life or I tell *everybody* that you used to be a guy. That’s the deal.”

“Oh, I can’t *wait* to wax you,” I mock-growled.

* * * * *

Ten days of supplements and machine feedings plus stuffing myself with as much food as I could hold as often as I could hold it and the dizzy and weak spells I suffered came much more seldom. I could do fifteen minutes on the treadmill now without becoming faint and could walk around the house – including stairs – all day without a problem. Cynthia ran yet another battery of tests and pronounced me stable but weak, which I parlayed with some well-placed begging and puppy-dog eyes into an afternoon out by myself. I had to wear a “panic button” and promise to call Mackenzi if *anything* happened, but I had some freedom to put some of my plans in action.

As much as I would have liked to indulge some of my more elaborate plans – like having the Mattel logo tattooed on my ankle to cement by commitment to Barbie – I had to keep it simple and stick to my budget. A few months of being housebound padded my bank account considerably and I had money to spend, even after my sprees online buying makeup and skincare products.

I started as I always did – making a big donation to the local homeless shelter, never forgetting my friends from the street even though they had most likely forgotten me. Not that any of them would even recognize me if they did. But they were still out there, I saw them on every corner. I couldn't keep my good fortune all to myself. Once upon a time, those grizzly and haggard street people had been my family.

After that, I hired an Uber and began my rounds of appointments. I knew Mackenzi would have gladly accompanied me to any of them, but something felt right to me about doing them by myself. I pushed through the door of the cosmetic dentistry office downtown, tinkling the bell above the door merrily, and sank gratefully into a chair in the lobby.

I filled out my paperwork and turned it over to the receptionist, only having a few minutes to leaf through an old copy of *Allure* before an attractive Hispanic hygienist called my name from the door and led me back. As she tilted the mechanized chair back and clicked on the bright light, my journey and my transformation began in earnest.



Mattel logo tattooed on my ankle to cement by commitment to Barbie

The word “fun” didn't begin to describe that day. From my tooth whitening appointment where I had acid gel spread on my teeth before having them bombarded with ultraviolet light, I went on to get myself waxed and my nails done. I had the manicurist add long, square-cut acrylic extensions and rhinestones to the nails on my index fingers, giving me long and lissome fingers that screamed *feminine*. After my mani-pedi I slipped into a cheap Wal-Mart bikini and treated myself to an airbrush tan which left my skin a deep, glowing amber. I squirmed and laughed as the ice-cold spray hit my exposed skin.

I ended the day with a long sit in a salon chair, getting my roots touched up and adding extensions to my hair, giving me a wild mane of platinum blonde which hung to my waist in thick, soft waves. I gave my precious Hello Kitty ring a fond kiss while I smoked a cigarette and waited for the Uber to come and take me home, confident and happy in my first steps towards Barbie-hood and becoming like the skinny, buxom blonde women I saw in my mind. They flashed by just on the edges of my consciousness. I didn't know where they came from but something told me they were connected to Jeff somehow. And to me. I just knew I needed to be like them. Everything would work out if I could just be like them.

I tossed my cigarette – stained on the end with my pink lipstick, and that phenomenon no longer anything out of the ordinary – and slung my purse in the crook of my arm as the car pulled to the curb. I sashayed on my platform heels and slid into the back seat, dropping the Chanel sunglasses nestled in the artificial thickness of my vanilla blonde hair onto my nose as I gave Cynthia's address to the driver.

* * * * *

Cynthia's impeccable look – not a single hair out of place – belied the long hours she'd spent in the lab perfecting the implantable protein generating gel which would keep me from starving to death, a victim of my own hyperactive metabolism. In the short fifteen days since my overdose, the constant hypermetabolic drive in my body burned through all of my body's remaining fat reserves and made the muscles beneath taut and hard. With very little in the way of exercise, I gained an athlete's body as hard as the Corps had ever made me. Because I now had a natural resting heart rate of 110 or more, Cynthia put me on prescription beta-blocker medication to allow me to sleep and sit still. Even so, the slightest provocation would cause a significant adrenaline dump, which gave me wild bursts of manic energy at strange, unpredictable times.

Unfortunately, these bursts of energy tended to manifest as extreme horniness. Since my genitals weren't quite fully developed as female, it made masturbation a very frustrating and sometimes even a painful affair. The few orgasms I did manage almost burned. It birthed a very serious want for sexual satisfaction in me, a quest for release every bit as urgent as I'd known as a male. I hoped I would be able to cum properly soon. I *needed* it.

The morning finally dawned when I would receive my implants. Cynthia and I hadn't talked much about what aesthetic I actually wanted, so busy she was just perfecting the process and making sure it wouldn't harm me further. When I walked into her lab shortly before dawn, wearing only a flimsy robe clutched tight around me, she gestured to an exam table in the center of the room with a tenuous smile on her face.

“How are you feeling?” she asked.

“Good,” I said. “Really looking forward to this.”

“You look good,” she told me. “Those collagen supplements have really made your skin soft.”

I caressed my shoulders. “I know. They're making my hair and nails grow faster, too.”

“Up on the table, please, Tiffany.”

I slipped out of my robe and slid, shivering a little, onto the table. Cynthia busied herself for a moment to start an IV in the crook of my left elbow. I hissed a little at the pain, and Cynthia stroked my shoulder fondly in response.

She drew up some medicine into a syringe. “This is going to help with the pain,” she told me. “This procedure will most likely hurt. I'm sorry, but I was in a bit of a rush.”

I offered her a reassuring smile. “The price we pay for beauty,” I said.

“You are completely unflappable, did you know that?” she said, leaning down and kissing my cheek.

“I'm my mama's girl,” I said proudly. I thought I saw a little glint in the corner of Cynthia's eye.

She had me tuck my long artificial hair – not before she commented again on its length and luster – into a surgical cap and then bridge up on my shoulders and heels while she fitted a boxy, rigid appliance beneath me. I settled into it and it covered my hips and buttocks completely. She fiddled with some hidden control and I felt the inside of the device conform tight to me, like an inflexible second skin.

“When I inject the protein-forming cells into you, they'll expand until they meet resistance,” she explained. “I had a friend of mine gin this up. It will create that resistance in increments as the gel is injected, keeping a pleasant form and not getting lumpy as it suspends itself in the collagen matrix.”

She clamped a second device, similar to the first, over my chest. The conforming insides of the box seemed to almost pull at my barely-existent breasts. Cynthia then hooked up several little hoses to apertures on the outsides of both boxes.

“The hips, buttocks and breasts will be done by computer control,” she said as she hooked up hose after hose. “But your lips, I'll have to do by hand, if that's okay.”

“You ever done lip injections before?”

“No, but I've observed them,” she said. “I dated a plastic surgeon during my residency. If that idiot can get good results, then so can I.”

I laughed softly. “Okay, I'm ready when you are.”

She finished the last of the hoses and retreated behind a computer. I began to feel a little dreamy as the painkiller kicked in.

“Okay, I'm going to insert the needles, honey,” she told me. “It's gonna hurt.”

I grabbed the edge of the bed in preparation as Cynthia pressed a key on the computer. With a

soft *whirr*, I felt dozens of sharp stings across my hips, chest and buttocks. I fought the urge to squirm and a tiny little mewling whimper escaped me. The pain quickly overwhelmed whatever numbness the drugs provided earlier.

"That's done," Cynthia announced. "Once I start, the process will take about an hour or so. It will be very uncomfortable, but you have to keep still. You mustn't move."

"Got it," I said a little raggedly.

She gave me a sympathetic look and tapped another key. The clear hoses attached to the devices on my body jumped gently as they charged with a light blue fluid. I felt pressure, right at first, then a slow warmth that quickly built into a stinging burn. The rigid appliances on my chest and backside seemed to grow uncomfortably tight, squeezing me and making the burning almost intolerable before it slowly subsided. The process only lasted a few minutes by the clock on the wall but felt much longer. I just began to breathe easier when I heard a soft hiss and the process began again.

"Oh, wow," I said through gritted teeth. "This *sucks*."

"I know, baby, I know," Cynthia cooed. "We can do the lips another time, if you want."

"No, I wanna do them now," I said. "Get it all over with at once."

"Brave girl," she said under her breath, but I heard her. She came out from behind the computer and slipped on a pair of gloves, then began drawing light blue fluid – the same as the stuff in the hoses pumping into my chest and ass – from a glass vial into a syringe. She prepared four syringes and attached long, wicked-looking needles to them before setting them thankfully out of my field of vision.

"I hope this won't be as bad, but the lips are very sensitive spots," she said. "I'll do my best."

I smiled at her. "I already know it's gonna hurt, mama," I said. "You don't have to keep apologizing. Remember, I *want* this."

"I know," she said. "Okay, lay back and close your eyes. Let's get started."



I wish I could say that enough of the rough-and-tough Marine in me kept me from whimpering and crying while Cynthia made injection after injection into my lips. I could feel the skin stretch taut and sore moments before the burning started, and then Cynthia had to pinch them between gloved fingers to keep them shaped properly while the gel set. Tears leaked from the corners of my eyes and streamed down the sides of my face, but I stayed true to my challenge and kept completely still.

After what seemed like an eternity, Cynthia dropped the last empty syringe into the sharps container at her side and stood straight, knuckling her back. “Done,” she announced.

I tried to smile but it felt like my lips just mashed and deformed over my teeth.

“Don't try to smile or talk just yet, honey,” she told me. “You're going to be very sore for the rest of the day, and I suspect this will take some getting used to. It's a very dramatic change.”

I raised a quizzical eyebrow and pointed to the device *whirring* away on my chest, then tapped my wrist where a watch would normally reside.

Cynthia checked her computer. “About twenty more cycles,” she told me. “Thirty minutes. I have to implant all the gel or you won't get enough protein to keep your body going. It's a considerable amount, sweetheart.”

She must have read the question in my eyes.

“I would suspect a very full double-D cup, possibly an F,” she said. “And easily a thirty-eight inch bust. Possibly even forty. You are going to be *quite* well-endowed. And because of how the gel

is implanted, and how it suspends itself from the collagen and keratin, they will look 'done.' Those gravity-defying kind you see in the centerfolds. That's what you wanted, right?"

I gave her an enthusiastic thumbs-up.

"Try to relax. Get some sleep, even," Cynthia told me. "You've got a long time left."

Another wave of burning and swelling coursed through my chest and ass, and I fought the urge to cry out. *Get some sleep, she said. Like that's gonna happen.*

* * * * *

Strangely enough, I must have managed. I woke up in a different room, under a thin sheet. My body felt like I'd been beaten, but even the lingering soreness couldn't stop me from tearing the sheet aside and leaping up to see myself in the full-length mirror next to the bed.

I could scarcely believe the reflection looking back at me. I pulled off the surgical cap to let my lengthened blonde hair fall around my narrow shoulders and across the tops of my huge, spherical breasts capped with proud pink nipples. My ribs showed through my smooth skin beneath them, tapering to a tiny waist before flaring out again into wide, lush hips. I turned around to see the perky, perfectly round bubble butt at the tops of my long, skinny legs. I leaned closer to see my face, narrow and angular but now dominated by a pair of smooth, shiny and lusciously inflated 'dicksucking lips' drawn into a permanent pout.

"Holy shit, is that really me?" I whispered, joy transforming my face into an ecstatic smile. "She did it! She really did it! I'm a Barbie! A gorgeous little blonde fuck doll!"

As I began to shimmy in a happy little dance, I noticed that I felt energetic for the first time in weeks. Not manic, like my adrenaline dumps, but like I could actually go out and walk around. Work out. Swim. I felt a deep reservoir of strength inside my tiny little body. For the first time in weeks, my body actually received nourishment. Aside from being *very* sore, I felt great. Really, really great.

And happy.

I don't know how long I stood there, turning circles in front of the mirror and just gazing at the feminine perfection of my body – I was actually *prettier* and *sexier* than the wispy ghost-bimbos in my fogged mind – before I noticed the little wrapped boxes on the floor next to my bed.

I opened the card atop them and read mama's neat, scientific hand.

My dearest daughter,

Thought you might like to have a little something that fits.

Love, Mama

Squealing with delight, I tore open the paper and pulled out the first of two pink bras, lacy and feminine and frilly enough for a new Barbie princess. The box under that had a card in Mackenzi's more bubbly and effervescent handwriting, saying:

Dear Tiff,

Thinking of you! Hope you're back on your feet soon!

XO, Mackenzi

Inside that box was a beautiful Gucci purse that I'd been eyeing for months in *Vogue* and *Elle*. Mackenzi must have seen me drooling over it. Quilted pink leather with sterling silver hardware. I slung it in the crook of my arm and posed with it nude, eyeing it this way and that in the mirror.

The last box had no card but contained a pink stretch cocktail dress, unadorned but very revealing. Unable to wait, I gathered all the boxes and paper and gifts into my arms and scampered up the stairs to my room, my new ass swaying in figure-eights behind me and my enormous new bimbo tits bouncing heavily on my narrow chest. I locked the door behind me and plopped happily in front of my dressing table, taking up my brushes and powders and getting to work. I vowed that the woman in the mirror would be a perfect plastic princess when I was done.

It took the better part of an hour before I got the flawless matte complexion and the hair just so. I snapped on a five-row rhinestone collar beneath the lustrous cascade of my gelled and moussed hair teased out big and wild. I'd done my eyes to make them dominate my face, appearing wide and surprised and innocent. I marveled at the amount of lip color it took now to cover my inflated plastic pout. With girlish glee, I slipped out of my panties – had to go commando in a dress as tight as the new one or it would spoil the lines – and shimmied my new, curvaceous body into the skin-tight pink lycra. I couldn't believe how little of me the dress actually covered – most of my new artificial boobs hung out the top and the bottom just barely covered my new artificial booty. I fought the urge to tug it down.

You dress like this now, better get used to it, I told myself happily.

The woman in the mirror, now perched on my nude Louboutin platforms, would never be taken seriously by anyone. Blonde and guileless, with a little-girl innocent face and a body designed specifically to arouse. The first thing anyone would ever notice about me was my breasts. I would forever be *the blonde with the huge rack* to people, before they even knew my name. A perfect little doll.

I waved my hands frantically in front of my eyes, beauty-pageant style, to keep my accumulating tears from ruining my carefully applied makeup. I fished in my new designer purse and drew out my iPhone to snap a celebratory selfie, blowing myself a heartfelt kiss with my new inflated pucker.

"I did it," I said happily, then listened to myself. Too low, too husky. Didn't suit the Barbie doll in

the mirror. I cleared my throat and tried again, pitching my voice much higher and breathier.

“Um, like... I *did* it!” I chirped, twisting a lock of hair around one long-nailed finger. There. *That* was the voice that suited the new me. “Oh, look how cute I look! I can't even!” I even let myself lapse into baby-talk at the end, delighting myself afresh.

I walked downstairs to show myself off, but found an empty house. Mama, no doubt, would be asleep and deservedly so. I had no idea where Mackenzi or Jeff might be. But I wanted to be *seen*! This was no good at all. I stood on the porch in the balmy night, listening to the tree-frogs sing, and lit a long skinny cigarette while I punched up another Uber to take me into town.



If Mackenzi or Jeff wasn't there to *ooh* and *aah* over my new fuck-doll form, then I would make damn sure that somebody would. I knew from my days on the streets where the happening nightclubs were. It was time for this girl to go dance, and take her new plastic boobs out for a spin.

I CONSIGNED MYSELF TO A long-ish wait to get into *Tableau*, one of the hottest nightclubs in the warehouse district, frequented by the young and gorgeous of the city. Once again, I underestimated the power of my new slammin' bod. The doorman took one look at me and unclipped the velvet rope from its brass pedestal and gestured me through. I swayed by in my sexiest strut, running a long fingernail across his broad chest and offering him a coy wink as I sashayed into the darkened interior.

The club pulsed with basso beats, whichever up-and-coming DJ they'd hired for the night

spinning in earnest to the raw, sexual energy of the club. I did a quick “lap,” as Mackenzi termed it, letting my luscious curves be seen and admired by men and women alike, before making my way up to the bar. Again, my new boobs spilling from the top of my little abbreviated pink dress worked their magic. I got served by the lantern-jawed bartender almost immediately, passing over several less-attractive women in the throng and earning me a few vitriolic sneers. I wasn't sure what I drank – what does the typical living Barbie doll get fucked up on? – as a general rule, but my preference wasn't running to something girly like a margarita or cosmopolitan at the moment. My sense of feminine pride and burgeoning adventure swelled inside me, threatening to spill out in a wild frenzy at any moment. The part of me that *wanted* that wild release urged me to take the easy road. *Get drunk*, it seemed to say. *Let yourself go*.

So I ordered the first in a long line of chilled tequila shots. Top shelf, of course – I had money in my purse and I intended to live large. But before I could place the ten-dollar bill down on the polished bar, a firm masculine hand laid a bill down, pre-empting me. The man offered me a veneered smile that looked rehearsed and too slick, but I still thanked him anyway and asked his name, shouting over the pulsating din of the club's house music. I had my drink, chattered idly about nothing, then allowed the man to lead me out to the dance floor to rub himself against me for a song before taking my leave to repeat the process.

And repeat it I did. I quickly lost track of how much I drank, only registering that I never had to buy a single drink for the rest of the rapidly-hazing night. Drink, flirt, dance, repeat. Drink, flirt, dance, repeat. I had no idea how many times I'd done it.



Small wonder that I found myself, tottering a bit unsteadily on my platform heels, lurching across a wet sidewalk downtown towards a tattoo and body-piercing studio, smoking a cigarette while I tried to force my numbed mind into a decision as to what, exactly, I expected to

get inside. Without ever being 100% sure, I lurched into the shop to the merry tinkling of the bell above the door and started looking around.

* * * * *

Downside of having a hyper-metabolism, I had to have extensive and experimental implant surgery in order to keep myself from starving to death three hours after I'd eaten. Upside, absolutely no trace of hangover. I'd slammed down enough tequila last night to blank out the end of the night, I only really remembered taking a cab downtown and walking towards a tattoo parlor, but I couldn't recall what happened after I'd walked in or how I'd gotten home that night. Everything must have worked out for the best, I surmised, because I awoke in my own bed and my pink cocktail dress hung neatly from a plastic hanger on my closet doorknob, my scandalously expensive Louboutin platforms arranged neatly below them.

I levered myself up onto my elbows and spit long, chalky hair from my mouth where it had migrated in my drunken sleep. I seemed to have removed my makeup – no sticky lipstick to trap my long blonde hair – and changed into a pink tank top and skin-tight blue workout shorts before collapsing into bed last night. My phone sat on my bedside table, resting on a stack of cocktail napkins in various states of decay. Every one held a different man's name and number. I grinned. I was really *on* last night.

As I sat up further, I suddenly felt a sharp stab of pain in my midsection, overriding the lingering ache and tenderness from my recent implants. My breath hissed with the unfamiliar and unexpected sting.

“What duh fuh...” I mumbled around a mouth seemingly stuffed with marbles. “Huh? Whazz wrong wif my mouf?”

I swung out of bed, kicking my thick covers to the floor, and padded on tip-toe across the hardwood towards my full-length mirror in my closet. Strange that I barely even noticed that I walked on tip-toe out of habit now, between being a tiny five-foot-barely petite and having my Achilles' tendons shortened by constantly wearing heels. I didn't even register the perky little bounce it elicited from my firm, spherical boobs.



Suddenly the stinging and the swollen tongue made sense. I lifted up my shirt and stuck out my tongue once I saw my reflection, showing a little dangling pink rhinestone heart from a fresh piercing above my navel (that sparkled deliciously against my *faux* tan) and a little silver stud driven through the center of my tongue. Apparently, my foray into the piercing parlor last night ended in success.

As the shock subsided, a little happy thrill ran through me. *OhmahGawd, look how cute!* I thought bubbly. *That little bellybutton ring is adorable! And a tongue stud? Wow! What possessed me?*

A brief image flashed through my mind – Jeff with his back leaning against a wall, myself on my knees in front of him, mouth wide, eliciting *incredible* groans from him as I ran my tongue-stud across his...

I giggled uncontrollably. *This is perfect*, I thought. I bounced back up on my tip-toes and made to scamper down the stairs – my boobs bounced wonderfully when I scampered – and find some ice to take the swelling down before I had to talk to anyone.

* * * * *

I managed a quick workout, a light breakfast – I still couldn't hold much food at all – and then a shower and almost two hours of hair and makeup before it fully sank in that the house was empty. I wondered at the oddity of that as I extracted more of my “maleness” from the disk implanted in the base of my neck and placed the vial into the fridge in Cynthia's lab. My phone showed a text message from Mackenzi, telling me she was going to breakfast with Richard and wouldn't be by until the afternoon. A handwritten note in Cynthia's doctor-scrrawl informed me that she had taken Jeff into the hospital for a round of tests and would probably be there

overnight.

Having the house to myself used to appeal to me on several levels, but for some reason the thought of not being *out*, not being *seen* really bothered me and took down my mood. The pervasive pride I felt in my appearance, my incredible new body, begged to be out and among others, being admired and adored. I loved the lecherous, caressing looks I got from men and the jealous, begrudging admiration I got from women.

I ran my slender fingers over the generous swell of my new breasts. I needed new clothes anyway, why not max out a credit card or two and go get myself decked out? A quick check of the little pegboard by the front door showed the keys to Jeff's silver Volkswagen Jetta hanging there, so I helped myself. I shimmied my expanded backside into a pair of skin-tight jeans with rhinestones on the pockets, pulled on a midriff-baring cropped sweater over a straining push-up bra. I almost missed threading the posts of the big golden hoops through my pierced ears from admiring the way my large, firm breasts spread the interval between the ribbing of the knit. Impulsively, I undid the buttons on the Henley neck to offer up a tempting valley of cleavage and dusted my exposed skin with a light mist of D or *J'Adore* before slinging my new Gucci purse in the crook of my arm. I perched a pair of Chanel bug-eye sunglasses on my slender nose and twirled the keys around one long-nailed finger as I walked outside, locked the front door and made my way to the covered parking at the side of the house to borrow Jeff's car.

As I adjusted myself to the idea of driving in eight-inch platform heels, sliding the seat back and forth and tilting the steering until I got used to the idea, I absentmindedly lit a cigarette and blew out a long plume of stale-smelling smoke before I realized I *probably* shouldn't be smoking in Jeff's car. I turned the key and motored down the window, waving smoke out into the open air with manicured hands before collapsing into a fit of giggles. If Jeff had a problem with my smoking in his car, then I felt *positive* that I could find a way to make it up to him. I ran my new tongue stud across the backs of my whitened teeth just to remind myself.

It took a few blocks of tire-chirping jackrabbit starts and screeching stops before I adjusted to driving in heels. I snapped a quick "selfie" of myself behind the wheel, making a pouty "duck-face" and flashing a peace sign with my free hand, out of sheer *joie-de-vivre*. The simple act of being young, sexy, blonde and buxom threatened to overwhelm me with giggling joy.

Life, prior to meeting Cynthia, resembled more of a punishment than a gift for most of my lifetime. Tortured by growing up male in a body that didn't fit my soul and the unspoken threat of a father who would kill me – quite literally – if he ever found out his son's predilection for pink. The frantic hell of Marine Basic Training came as welcome relief, honestly, but the tacit *don't ask, don't tell* policy kept the most vibrant and enjoyable part of my mind and soul cloistered behind high walls, always a shameful secret. From there, I went to war, and gained a blissful respite from the burden of keeping my secret – survival and achievement replaced everything else in priority for those years. But the strain of war and keeping my secret for so long eventually caught up with me, leading me out onto the streets to fight for basic needs like food and shelter.

Not much room for happiness, only stolen moments alone when I could stretch an ill-fitting bra across my chest or cram my genitals unkindly into a pair of panties. I thought back to my

happiest moment on the streets – finding a half-full bottle of pink nail polish in the trash outside a nail salon and then a well-lit outdoor tool shed with a working space heater behind a general contractor's office. I sat in warmth and comfort for an hour, painting my nails in the full light of day without shame or guilt.

And now, this. Only tiny little sips of happiness until Cynthia found me and now trying to adjust to a torrential flood of joy descending on my every waking moment. I had little in the way of mental equipment to process happiness at all, much less on the level I felt it now. I felt like a giggling, simpering idiot most days, unable to come close to expressing the fluttering swell of joy in my chest with every bounce of my beautiful breasts, every tug of my long hair against my shoulders, every brush of my dangling earrings against my neck, the drag of the purse in the crook of my arm, the *click-clack* of my heels on hardwood floors, the perfumed taste of lipstick on my tongue. I walked into stores and bought heart-shaped sunglasses, Capri 120 cigarettes and *Vogue* magazine without the slightest twinge of fear. I slept, I ate, I showered whenever I wanted, putting a final end to the hardwired impulses of being homeless. I didn't even fear being attacked or raped – yes, the thought crossed my mind, but even though I wore a DD-cup bra and designer platform heels now, this bitch still bore the title of United States Marine. Anyone who got the idea to help themselves to my luscious new body without my permission would damn well know they'd been in a fight. Even if I was raped, I would tear off plenty of souvenirs in the commission.

That didn't stop me from pulling into my first stop, however. I was a petite little girl in a very big and very dangerous world. I opened the manila envelope in my purse, fresh from whatever clandestine source Cynthia tapped, and shook out a new drivers' license, Social Security card, credit card and passport. Emblazoned with my new, blonde-bombshell picture; height five-foot-two and weight one hundred pounds; name Tiffany Amber Reynolds; and gender – finally, irrevocably, *wonderfully* – female. Cynthia even got my DD-4 changed and my service record – including my honorable discharge – transferred to my new name and gender. A quick check confirmed everything in order and I *clicked* and *clacked* my designer heels on the sidewalk and into Erlenmayer's Guns and Ammo to find myself a bit more protection.

I got incredible service from the three old and overweight men who ran the handgun cabinet. Every time I leaned over to examine the cased firearms I could hear their breathing catch, and they addressed every statement to my magnificent breasts. Far from being offended, I *loved* it. I never even gave them the opportunity to mansplain anything to me, deluging them with my knowledge and experience with weapon selection and finally settling on two handguns – a Glock 42 .380cal and a Sig Sauer P226 .40cal, both of which fit my small hands perfectly – for personal use. I signed all the forms in rounded, bubbly script and left my contact information for pickup after the waiting period. I bit a chunk from my credit limit – paying cash for firearms always looked shady, so I left a paper trail – as I walked out and checked the mapping application on my phone to plot out my shopping spree.

Shopping guilt-free – both for buying women's clothing out in the open *and* knowing I had the money for my purchases – as a beautiful young blonde came as a new and exciting experience. As a male, I limited myself to sneaked looks at the silky, colorful racks of women's clothing or the occasional five-finger discount. Now I browsed openly, sorting contentedly through the gorgeous garments and taking advice from store staff and patrons alike as to what went with my

complexion or complimented my eyes. I favored skin-tight – surprise, surprise – and revealing over anything else; even my “comfy” PJ's clung to my every curve and exposed a generous swathe of cleavage. The challenge of finding shoes, handbags and accessories to match chosen outfits delighted me no end, dragging what I expected to be a two-hour foray into the five-hour range, bouncing from store to store and back again. At one point I realized that I walked back three blocks for a pair of shoes I passed on buying because they went perfectly with a dress I found in another boutique unexpectedly. The admission made me giggle to the point of laughing out loud. Never in my life had I done anything so overtly *girly*. Not feminine, *girly*. Silly and pointless and for the sheer joy and satisfaction of doing it.

I made my way back to my car laden with shopping bags, a huge fanned ruffle of multicolored sacks dangling from each hand. The gorgeous but impractical shoes hurt my arches and pinched my toes, but I never considered taking them off or complaining. The heels belonged on my feet, and I belonged in them. Besides, I needed the extra height to reach high shelves. Cynthia's magic made me *tiny*. I didn't emerge from my chrysalis just a girl, I emerged as a *little* girl.

I puffed out a long breath of exertion as I slid into the driver's seat of the Jetta, looking in the rearview mirror at the long row of shopping bags on the back seat with a smile before checking my hair and makeup. I applied a bit of gloss to my full, pouty lips and silently thanked Cynthia's miraculous implants for giving me the energy and wherewithal to stay on my feet so long. My phone trilled with an incoming text message and I went through the wild gesticulations necessary to unlock, receive and answer a smartphone text with fingernails nearly an inch long. I smiled again, infused by the all-encompassing happiness. I would never complain. Other women might, bitching about texting with long nails, but not me. I *earned* that inconvenience, just like I earned the lingering ache in my tortured feet from walking several miles in platform heels. I sweated and bled for those aches and inconveniences. And I would fight like a wildcat to keep them.

Mackenzi's name and picture showed in my inbox and I tapped her message to answer it with a *click* of manicured acrylic nail against touchscreen. **At the house, where r u?**

I texted back as quickly as my nails would allow, making mistakes that I intentionally didn't correct because I liked being one of those girls who couldn't spell. I found it cute. **Out shopping omw home rite now.**

A short interval, then: **Ok QT I'll w8 here!**

I sent her a “kiss” emoji in reply and started the car, pulling back into traffic and starting my short journey back to Cynthia's house.

* * * * *

Mackenzi waited for me on the front step, surfing social media on her smartphone as I pulled the car through the circular drive and into the covered parking by the side of the house. Mackenzi trotted over to me, still dressed in an adorable sundress and sandals from her date, and wrapped me in a tight hug as I crawled out from behind the wheel. I still had trouble ignoring the lovely flattening of her breasts against mine when we embraced.

She peered into the back seat. “Jesus, Tiff, you said you were shopping, but *damn!* Are there any clothes left out there for the rest of us?”

“Nope, I bought 'em all,” I giggled. I held her at arms' length. “OhmahGawd, Mac, *look* at you! That dress is adorable!”

She held the hem of the yellow floral sundress out and twisted from side to side. “Glad you like it.”

I loaded myself down with bags and she did the same, following me across the crunching gravel to the side door where I dug in my purse for the keys. “How was Richard?” I asked, dying of curiosity.

She blushed scarlet. “He's good,” she said airily.

I looked at her intently. “You *slut!*” I teased. “You fucked him!”

Mackenzi broke into an ear-to-ear, self-satisfied grin. “Actually, Tiff, it was more like he fucked me,” she said dreamily, obviously reliving a blissful memory. “Wow, did he fuck me.”

I finally wrestled the house keys from their nest and the absolute bottom of the purse abyss and stuffed them into the deadbolt. “Details. I wanna hear *everything.*”

She followed me upstairs to my room, bags dangling from her hands as well as my own. *God*, I thought, *how did I ever carry all this stuff by myself?* But I didn't linger over the wonder as Mackenzi began her story.

“Well, y'know, this was date number three,” she told me. “At least, I think it was. We had that one quick meet for coffee that time, but I never counted that as a date. Either way, I wanted it to be kinda special, y'know? A little bit of a celebration.”

“What did you do?”

“I was gonna make all these suggestions when I called him, but he never let me get to that,” she said. “He cut me off and said 'I know *just* the place' before I could get a word out.”

“Ooh! Where did he take you?” I asked, dumping all my purchases on the bed. Mackenzi helped me start sorting through – I tore open a package of clothes hangers I picked up at a corner drugstore and began hanging things up as I went.

Mackenzi began opening shoeboxes. “He picked me up at my place – ooh! These are so cute! – and took me to this little park. I mean *little*, maybe a quarter of a city block. Just a patch of trees and a fountain. He walked me out into the middle of it.”

I held up a new “little black dress” with a bouncy little peplum against my body and looked at myself in the mirror appraisingly before putting it on a hanger. “Just a park?”

“He points across the street,” she tells me, holding some of my newly purchased earrings up to the side of her face in the mirror beside me. “You *totally* have to let me borrow these, okay? Anyway, he points across the street and there’s the Jiffy Lube where we met.”

“Aww, how sweet,” I cooed.

“So he goes, ‘there’s where I had the happiest moment of my life.’ Like that wouldn’t have melted me into goo, all by itself, but then he goes, ‘and here is where I stood when I made the phone call to my brother to tell him about the happiest moment of my life. Right under this streetlamp.’”

Mackenzi handed me a handful of hangers she’d finished loading and I hung them over the rod in the closet. “I didn’t tell you about his brother,” she told me. “He’s a year and a half older than Richard and he’s in a wheelchair from MS. Richard always told me that unless he tells his brother about something, it’s like it didn’t even happen.

“So then he takes my hands,” she went on, “and says that his brother listened to him go on and on about meeting me and then finally says, ‘man, you have really got it bad.’ Richard told me that before he even knew what he was saying, the next thing out of his mouth was ‘Yeah, I think I’m in love.’”

I blotted a tear out of my eye, imagining a similar scenario playing out between myself and Jeff. “Oh, my God, Mac.”

“So then he turns his head and he whistles real loud, and the streetlight comes on,” Mackenzi said, her eyes bright with joyous tears. “And there’s a little four-piece Dixieland band and they start playing. We stood in that park and danced for an hour, Tiff.”

“That is the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard.”

“At the end, he picked a flower out of one of the beds around that streetlight and puts it behind my ear, then offers me his arm like Cary Grant and walks me back to the car,” Mackenzi said. “He unlocks the car, and instead of getting in the front seat, I open up the back and drag him in on top of me.”

“You didn’t!” I gasped.

“Right there on 12th Street, yes I did,” she asserted proudly. “We drove back to my place about an hour later, clothes and hair all messed up, and then we did it three more times. I haven’t had any sleep, but I don’t feel tired at all. I feel like I can fly.”

“I bet you do.”

“Tiff, honey, I am so happy,” she told me. “I’m so happy that I don’t trust it. It’s like I’m afraid to feel it because...”

“...because you’re afraid someone’s going to bust in at any moment and say ‘hah, fooled you,

bitch!' and take it all away," I finished for her.

She looked deeply into my eyes. "Exactly," she said quietly.

"Well, don't," I said brightly. "I mean it. Stop. You deserve this."

"It's going really fast," Mackenzi confessed. "Like, scary fast. But I want it to go fast. I want it to be scary. I'm so fucking *sure* of this, Tiff. God, I... I think I'm gonna *marry* him."

"Seriously?"

"If he asked, I can't imagine myself saying no," she said. "I want to spend the rest of my life with him. I want to have his babies. I'd never even thought about that kinda stuff before, and suddenly, *poof!* Now it's there, and I'm absolutely certain of it. Can you believe that?"

Her final question snapped me from a whirlwind daydream brought about by the word *babies*. "Yes, I can believe it," I murmured, imagining myself swollen with Jeff's baby, feeling it squirm and kick inside my body, pushing it out of me in a storm of pain and blood and then holding it close to my skin... *but can I? Can I even have babies?*

Mackenzi stroked my forearm. "Did I upset you?"

I smiled. "Huh? Oh, God, no," I laughed. "You just really got me thinking."

"I must've said this to myself a hundred times since he left for work this morning," she said. "You'll be the first other person I've said it to. Tiff, I love him. I love him so much."

I hugged her tight. "I kinda figured that one out all on my own," I whispered fondly into her hair.

"So, now I wanna seduce him," she told me. "He gave me the Disney storybook romance, so now I want to give him the live-action porno. I need help picking out lingerie. Wanna take those makeup brushes and help make me into a porn slut?"

I giggled and bounced. "Oh, honey, I thought you'd never ask," I said. "We're gonna rock his *world*."

* * * * *

Mackenzi and I chatted about her nefarious plot to seduce Richard while I put away my new clothes – there were many more of them than I remembered, and I shuddered at the thought of my credit card bill – and then went back out for lunch. I made copious mental notes, even as hard as I found it to concentrate since my overdose, trying to plot my own seduction of Jeff.

Mackenzi pulled a few strings through a client and got us a table at the Meadowheath Country Club for lunch. She didn't tell me to go easy, with my lessened capacity for food I turned out to be a cheap date at even the most expensive restaurant. I ordered a chef salad and white wine and surveyed the terrace where we sat, looking around at the scandalously rich people finishing

their games of tennis and golf and sitting down to their overpriced food and cocktails. One particular table caught my eye and kept drawing it back – a cluster of about six women, all in the twenty-something age range with big silicone boobs and puffy collagen lips, wearing expensive designer clothes and dripping with diamonds. It seemed as though the older, more sophisticated-looking women sneered at them silently, but the younger women didn't seem to mind. They ordered only the most expensive items on the menu and waved away the bills as though the money didn't matter. They fascinated me.

“I wonder who those girls are?” I murmured, unaware I'd even spoken.

Mackenzi followed my gaze to the table. “Oh, I forget this really isn't your element,” she said quietly. “Those are the trophy wives, hon. Younger women married to rich older men. They get the huge bank accounts and the men get the hot, twenty-four-year-old lingerie model in their bed every night. Can't you see how the older women are hating on them?”

“Yeah?” I asked, still transfixed.

“Because those girls poach their men. Most of the divorcées around here lost Husband #1 to a trophy wife,” Mackenzi said. “They're sexy, they're very agreeable and they don't cause trouble.”

“Trophy wives, huh?” I asked musingly. “Doesn't seem like such a bad gig.”

Mackenzi laughed. “There's more than enough rich older guys around this place who have been staring at those gigantic boobs of yours enough to get you an 'in,' if you wanted to go that route,” she teased.

I grunted and shook my head. “That would be a perfect plan, if not for one problem.”

“None of those guys are Jeff,” Mackenzi surmised.

“Bingo,” I said, pushing my plate of half-eaten salad away, completely stuffed.

Mackenzi laughed behind her hand. “Oh, honey, I wish there was something I could do to help,” she said, rubbing the back of my hand in sympathy.

“You've helped more than you know, baby,” I told her. “You're the only reason I haven't lost hope.”

“I just can't believe Jeff can't see it,” she said.

“He probably never even thought about having a girlfriend before I showed up,” I said. “Cynthia said he stayed pretty preoccupied with his health and never really thought he'd ever have a girlfriend.”

“Makes sense,” Mackenzi said. “Still, I wish you could turn that boy's head somehow, get him to look at you as the girl you are and not some savior.”

“Oh, I have an idea or two,” I said with a naughty smile. “I think I might be able to get his attention.”

* * * * *

I awoke to one of those strange spring days requiring a jacket in the morning, then warm enough to swim by the afternoon. I made a quick trip to the college early that morning after my morning preparations – no way did I leave the house in less than full hair and makeup these days – and officially changed my major to cosmetology. I hoped Cynthia wouldn't be too disappointed in a hairdresser for a daughter instead of a Nobel laureate. I zipped through the bookstore, picking up the recommended textbooks for my first three beauty courses and returned home quickly.

Late last night, after snuggling down in my bed for the evening, I realized that Jeff hadn't seen me since I had my curves installed. Either I had been recovering in a hospital or he had. I hatched a plan to use my new overstuffed boobs and Barbie doll body to best effect. I changed into a skimpy black bikini with gold buckle detailing and arranged myself by the pool in back, slicking and shining my skin with coconut oil and laying out in the glorious early afternoon sunshine to augment my spray tan with the real thing. I set up my bluetooth speaker to play happy, bubbly “chick pop” from my Spotify account and browsed lazily through my new cosmetology textbooks while I sipped a margarita and smoked a few cigarettes.

I heard Cynthia's tires crunch through the gravel around the side of the house and then the muffled bumps and bangs of Jeff entering the house. I purposefully left the recycling in place this morning to lure Jeff outside.

I dimly heard Cynthia take the bait through the kitchen window. “Jeff, honey, Tiffany forgot to take out the recycling this morning,” she called. “Could you please?”

“Sure, mom,” came the reply in Jeff's ever-deepening voice.



I timed sitting up and propping myself on my hands – arching my back the way I'd practiced in the mirror last night to get it *just* right – to Jeff's exit from the back door. His wide eyes and dropped jaw rewarded my efforts perfectly.

“Oh, hey, Jeff!” I perked happily. “You're home!”

Jeff suffered a long pause before composing himself enough to reply. “Hi, Tiff – wow. You look different,” he muttered sheepishly.

I jiggled my enormous boobs invitingly. “You like?”

“Uh... yeah,” he said. “You look... you look fantastic,” he said.

“Thanks, sweetheart,” I purred. “I was hoping you'd like it. I know it's pretty drastic, but it turns out I needed all this extra tissue to counteract the overdose. It was big boobs or starve to death.”

He finally regained his composure. “You must've been really hungry, then,” he teased.

I stuck out my tongue, then caressed my breasts as if I'd never seen them before. “Actually, now that I have them, I can't imagine *not* having them,” I said. “They fit me, don't they?”

“Yeah,” he said. “But the lips, and the hair... you went kinda all-out, didn't you?”

I gave him a playful pout. “You're gonna stand there and tell me you don't like it?”

"I do!" he countered a bit too quickly. "I really do, but... I mean... It's gonna take some getting used to. You changed so much. And it's only been what... a couple days?"

I ran my hands over my body, my firm breasts and flat tummy and smooth legs. "Didn't mean to shock you, honey," I said. "But this... this doesn't take getting used to. One look in the mirror and I knew I was finally looking at the real me. I don't even want to think about any of the bodies I've had before this. This is absolutely perfect."

He smiled. "You do look very comfortable in yourself," he said. "Like you're at peace."

"Peace," I mused. "Yeah."

* * * * *

Usually, my evening online experience revolved around social media. This time I actually did research. The concept of the *trophy wife* dominated my thoughts, and I gravitated towards finding out what that sort of lifestyle could be all about. I sorted through a lot of chauvinist bullshit penned by sexually frustrated men until I found a few good blogs by women who gave their lives a lot of thought. A fixation on my appearance, looking and acting sexy all the time, seemed easy enough. But of the three blogs I read that night, I found that sucking cock figured prominently into their identities. I didn't immediately blanch at the thought, not like I used to, but the thought of putting any man's dick in my mouth who wasn't Jeff did not appeal to me.

I could practice, I supposed, using dildos or cucumbers, but eventually I would need a live subject. I would hate to offer myself up as a potential trophy wife to Jeff having never actually done the deed before. No, I resolved, I would have to go out and blow somebody. Maybe multiple somebodies. By the time I sank to my knees in front of Jeff, I wanted to be an experienced fellatrix. Somehow, just making the decision seemed to take some of the anxiety from it. I would somehow transform the word 'cocksucker' from a former insult to a point of pride over the next few months.

For some strange reason – maybe the sight of the colorful clothes I bought hanging neatly in my closet – I finished the evening by checking my credit card balance online. My breath caught painfully in my throat at the sight of the staggering number.

I might have to put my cocksucking career on hold for a bit. At least until I found myself a job.

I lay awake that night for a few hours, staring at the play of moonlight through the trees outside my window dappling the ceiling above me, wondering what kind of work might be out there for a girl with no experience and no history. Besides the Corps, I had never really worked anything more than a few menial jobs as a teenager, and I doubted my experience at a car wash would dent my hefty debt. And no construction firm would hire a five-foot-two blonde with giant silicone tits to frame houses. Which left me low-paying, menial jobs. From those, I selected those which best suited the image of myself as a blonde, airheaded bimbo like the pictures I dimly viewed in my brain as sleep found me.

I awoke the next morning and bummed a ride into town with Jeff. Since changing my major, I

dropped all my current classes in favor of starting fresh the next semester, giving me three weeks before having to deal with my classes. I fought the urge to hold his hand on the gearshift as we chatted idly during the drive. He fought the urge to stare at my tits. I noticed, past my low-cut top, that he shifted uncomfortably in his seat a few times. I wondered if the treatments made his dick as big as his pectorals and forearms. His drug-induced masculine renaissance culminated in a superb physique that begged to have my long-nailed fingers tracing every inch of him. I hoped my pussy would open soon. Being around Jeff would release a huge tide of pent-up wetness.

I walked the beat I'd plotted the night before, applying for 'bimbo' jobs like receptionist and waitress as I went. No one ever gave me a second glance – other than the appreciative gawking at my boobs, of course – before I ended my journey at the rough-hewn portico of the local Hooters. I pushed my way in and followed a delicious pair of buns in orange spandex to a seat near the door.



Hooters!

I made quick work of the four-page application and waited over a glass of iced tea for the manager to arrive, watching the vivacious Hooters girls flirt their way through the lunchtime crowd with smiles and jokes. I felt a sense of kinship with them, instinctively *knowing* that I would excel at that job. And it looked fun to be a Hooters Girl. None of my other applications that day carried any expectation or hope – I just needed a paycheck. Now, though – I found myself *wanting* this job. I touched up my hair and makeup in a compact mirror and steeled myself to make a good impression.

The manager, Bobby, finally arrived about twenty minutes after he was expected by the staff. He took another applicant, one I hadn't seen from the outdoor patio, before gesturing me over. He stood, shaking my hand, favoring me with a wide and genuine smile and folding his hands across his ample belly as he sat across from me.

"So, Tiffany," he said in a booming but friendly bass, "it says here you served?"

"Marines," I replied. "Afghanistan."

He examined my face. "I can see why you don't want to go into detail," he said at length. "I was a Marine back in '88. Desert Storm. Whole different ball game, back then. Wars had armies."

"Yes, sir," I replied. "I'm just real glad to be home. I've changed a lot since I left the Corps."

"Ah, but it sticks with you," Bobby chuckled. "This your first job since you got home?"

"I *hope* it'll be my first job," I said with a smile. "I tried to go to school full-time, but I couldn't handle all the free time."

"Too unstructured, right?" Bobby said. "I get it. So, why here?"

I tapped my nails idly on the tabletop as I considered my answer. "I've applied for a lot of jobs lately," I told him honestly. "Structured, sure, like you said. But flat. This place... honestly, this place looks like fun. I could use a little fun in my life, and if I just happen to get paid in the process..."

"What makes you think you'd be a good Hooters Girl?" he asked.

"I don't know if I would be or not, truth be told," I said. "But I sure do want the chance to find out."

Bobby steepled his fingers. "Y'know, I have a list of questions I'm supposed to ask you, but I have a feeling about you," he said. "This ain't easy work. These girls hustle. But yeah, it can be a lot of fun. You show up on time, you don't get complacent or lazy, and you'll do fine. I'll be interested to see how you do around the customers, and that will be the make-or-break, but I think you've got the stuff. So, if you wanna be a Hooters Girl, I'll give you a crack at it."

"Really? Thanks," I said with a bright smile.

"Hey, us Marines gotta stick together, right? *Semper fi* and all that," he said with a smile.

"I'd like to think it wasn't just the Marines," I told him.

He shook his head. "No, it's you. I have a feeling about you. I'm gonna send you off with Kelsey, she's our senior girl on days. She'll get you hooked up with the uniform order and get your nametag and ID ordered, fill out your W-2, that kind of stuff. You can start next week."

"Thanks, Bobby," I said, standing and shaking his hand. "I won't let you down."

"Welcome to Hooters, Tiffany," he said.

* * * * *

I'd never been more pleased to be right about a gut impression. Hooters was fun. I squeezed and stretched the spandex of my new uniform over my taut body – at Kelsey's instruction, I had ordered extra-extra-small size to best show off my body – and spent my "orientation" flirting with customers and racking up tips. By the end of my first week, I had moved to the dinner hour and worked independently without supervision. I made some potential good friends – a pale-skinned redhead with adorable freckles named Megan and a lissome Latina with waist-length sable hair named Jazmin. My customers didn't even mind when I fucked up their orders, since I stood close and rested my breasts on their forearms, smiled and flirted and posed for pictures. Even though Jazmin and Kelsey both said I was a little "stripper-y" in my look for the typical Hooters Girl, I suited the job and the job suited me.

I sat at the end of a long Friday dinner shift, counting my tips with Jazmin and Megan and another quiet girl named Heather, when I noticed Bobby coming in and bee-lining for his office in the back.

"I'm really glad Bobby gave me the job," I commented to the other girls. "I like Mark, the night manager, but Bobby just seems really sweet. I wish he managed nights."

"God, he is *such* a doll," Megan said. "It's so sad about his wife."

I raised a meticulously-style eyebrow in curiosity.

"Nobody told you?" Heather asked. "About six months ago, out of nowhere, his wife just dropped. Massive stroke. She was only thirty-two. Left Bobby as a single dad with two little kids."

"Oh my God," I breathed. "How sad."

"Yeah, Bobby was a wreck," Jazmin said. "But he always made time for us. And you should see him with those two little girls. He's the most amazing dad."

"Yeah, and dads are sexy," Heather put in.

"Oh, I would *totally* do Bobby," Jazmin confirmed.

I made a final determination in my head. I folded my cash tips into a small roll and tucked it into my purse – and hand-me-down Louis Vuitton from Cynthia – and slung it over my shoulder.

"Hey, I really need to head out," I said. "I'll see y'all bitches tomorrow, 'kay?"

"Later, babe," Jazmin said.

"You got a hot date?" Megan teased.

"I might," I said cryptically, then walked into the back towards the dressing room. I grabbed my bag from my locker just for the sake of not leaving evidence, then backtracked and knocked softly on the door of the manager's office.

"Yeah?" a soft, basso voice answered from inside.

I squeezed inside, shutting the door of the claustrophobic office behind me. "Hey, Bobby," I said quietly. "What brings you here so late?"

He gestured to a mound of paperwork on his desk. "Gotta re-up our liquor license and get ready for the health inspector next week," he said. "Got a ton of government forms to fill out."

"Hey, I just wanted to thank you again for hiring me," I told him.

"Yeah, you seem to be tearing it up out there," he chuckled. "You like it here?"

"A lot," I answered. I peered over his shoulder at the mound of forms. "Looks complicated."

"It's not," Bobby said. "Just tedious as hell. But it's gotta be done."

"Stuff like that, it'll make you tense," I commented.

"Yeah, it can do that."



"Hey, I just wanted to thank you again for hiring me," I told him.

I pushed him gently back in his chair and sank to my knees. "I know the cure for that," I whispered, already working on the button of his fly and licking my lips in anticipation.

I WAITED ABOUT THIRTY MINUTES in the supply room before I finally left, not wanting the other girls to see me leaving Bobby's office. I could still taste him – warm and dark and musky – on my tongue, and the acrid taste of his climax still burned my throat a bit. I hadn't expected so *much*. When I came as a male, there hadn't been nearly as much semen. I thought Bobby's load was going to shoot out my ears and nose before he finally slumped back.

I slung my uniform bag over the same shoulder as my purse and trotted out to my car, marveling at my audacity. In my quest to suck my first cock, I obsessed over finding someone as attractive to me as Jeff and worried that I wouldn't be able to go through with it unless I did. I had no sexual attraction to Bobby whatsoever, and that made going down on him so *easy*. Attraction, no, but I genuinely *liked* him and liked the feeling of being able to *give* to him. Bobby had been so nervous, and so grateful afterwards. We laughed our way through the awkwardness and wound up being closer as friends, at least by my estimation. We shared a brief conversation about not making things weird at work and keeping it to a one-time thing, him claiming that he needed to be my boss first of all and I was young enough to be his daughter, *yadda yadda yadda*. I agreed wholeheartedly. I just wanted to give him a brief few moments of fun and pleasure. I accomplished that. And I got to achieve my goal, walking out of my restaurant that night officially a cocksucker.

I sent a quick text to Mackenzi, my ride home, and crossed the street to the Starbuck's to sip a

latte and smoke a quick cigarette outside while I waited. I played with a new scheduling app on my iPhone for a while, trying to get the hang of balancing work, school, my plans for Jeff and my beauty regimen. Staying glamorous and gorgeous took up a lot of my time, not just in front of the mirror in the mornings with my makeup brushes. I needed time in the gym to keep the tight bits tight, plus time in the hair salon tending to my extensions, the eyelash salon filling in the ones that fell out, getting fills on my long, fake acrylic nails, touching up my spray tan. The life of a trophy wife certainly appealed, being able to schedule these things at my leisure.

Mackenzi pulled up at the end of my second cigarette. I smiled brightly and waved at her as she parked, wrapping her in a fond hug before escorting her to the counter to order her customary cappuccino. We walked back to her car arm-in-arm. I longed to tell her about my encounter with Bobby, but she had the dreamy look in her eyes that told me her brain swam in images of Richard.

She segued straight in. "So, it's possible that I'm not gonna be around quite as much," she said in an attempt at being carefree.

"You're moving in together?" I asked.

She smiled joyously as she nodded. "Am I nuts?"

I wrapped my arms around her, my giant breasts flattening against the center console of her Nissan Xterra. "Probably," I told her. "But you love him. And he loves you. It's all headed that direction anyway, right?"

"I just hope we're not ruining everything, going this fast," she said.

"That's up to you," I told her. "Neither of y'all is a victim."

"You're right, of course," she said, sticking her key in the ignition after a deep drink of coffee. "But that is gonna mess up your life a little, I guess."

"I'll deal," I said.

She waved me off. "I know you will, baby doll. But we had a deal, back before I met him," she said. "So I hope you don't mind, but I talked to Cynthia."

"Talked to her about what?" I asked.

"She's got a Jeep Wrangler that she never uses," Mackenzi said. "She bought it for Jeff, way back when, but he was too sick to ever drive it and then they just tarped it and got the Jetta he's in now once he headed back to school. Anyway, there's a perfectly good car just sitting there. Cynthia was gonna sell it, but now she's giving it to you."

I goggled. "Seriously? A car?"

Mackenzi nodded. "It's old, and the gas mileage sucks, but it's yours," she said. "At least you

won't be dependent on me or some creepy Uber driver for a lift every time you want to go out. Cynthia's sending it to the mechanic to get tuned up and checked over. You should be able to plop your fat-free ass in it by Monday."

"I feel kinda bad," I said in a bimbo *faux*-whine. "She's given me so much."

"Not in her eyes," Mackenzi corrected. "You gave her back her son. She can never repay that."

She changed the subject airily, steering the conversation away from the wistful. "So, you ready for classes to start on Monday?"

"Yeah, actually," I replied. "I'm really excited about it. I've been reading my textbooks, and some of that stuff is really interesting. I didn't realize there was so much science behind it."

"Y'know, I can actually see you in a salon doing hair," she told me. "It's a very happy image."

"I just hope I can do it," I confessed. "I was never a great student, and now my thinker is all scrambled up from the overdose and I can't keep my attention on something for longer than about ten minutes. It's really gonna suck if I flunk out of beauty school."

"I think if you're as interested in it as you say, you won't have any problems," Mackenzi told me. "And if you get into real trouble, try to blow the professor and get an A."

I laughed out loud. If my friend only knew.

* * * * *

Saturday and Sunday blurred by – I took a double shift on Saturday to bank some hours before school started and spent most of Sunday in one salon or another getting my look fine-tuned. A few awkward moments between Bobby and myself sprang up, but we laughed them off and kept going like the friends we were. Cynthia handed me the keys to the tuned-up and detailed ragtop Jeep on Sunday night after dinner, and we spent my last few hours of freedom taking little spins around town while I set up my satellite radio channels and GPS preferences.

The last little vestiges of winter made themselves known by Monday morning, and I wrapped up in winter clothes for the chilly ride into school. I found my first class – Acts, Rules & Licensing Requirements – without much problem and took a seat near the front. The rest of the day would consist of classes entitled Scalp & Hair Treatments, Disinfecting & Sanitation and finally – the one I looked forward to the most – Hairstyling.

All around me, the rest of my class filed in. Even though I knew they were younger than I was, I couldn't consider them *kids* in my mind. I looked younger than most of them. But the class soon filled with overly made-up girls with wildly colored streaks in their hair, chatty obese girls, quiet and reserved Asians and flamboyant gay men. By the time Professor Crawford entered and squeaked his name on the whiteboard with a flourish, my sense of excitement and anticipation subsumed beneath a tidal wave of *fuck, what have I gotten myself into?* Still, I did want to make a career out of this, so I blanked out all the background noise as well as my lowered attention span

would allow and tried to focus.



Fuck, what have I gotten myself into?

Mackenzi awaited me at home after school, wanting to know everything about my classes. We chattered away about nothing in particular in the effortless way we'd developed. The development of our relationship astonished me – the woman who'd first taught me how to properly cross my legs and how to walk in heels now occupied the role of best gal-pal, confidante and support network.

My hectic day finally caught up to me and I excused myself, needing to do a little bit of reading for tomorrow's class – Intro to Nail Care – and get some much-needed sleep before waking at the crack of dawn to make myself presentable. Mackenzi gave me a vice-like hug and a kiss on the cheek as I headed upstairs. I bumped into Cynthia on the landing.

"Are you headed to bed?" she asked.

"I think so, yeah," I said, stifling a yawn. "This new schedule is gonna take some getting used to."

"Don't overdo, dear," she told me fondly. "Your implants give you energy, but it's not limitless."

"Don't I know it," I joked. "Between school and work, I don't know how I'm gonna pull this off."

"If anyone can, it's you," she said, caressing my cheek. "My daughter can do anything. But that doesn't mean you necessarily should. You know what you need? A day off."

I giggled. "Sure," I said. "I could stand to loaf around the house like the old days."

"I didn't mean that," she corrected gently. "I have a friend from school who runs a very nice day spa outside town. Eight pristine acres of pine forest. I'm going to call her and get you a day pass. You deserve a day of peace and quiet, getting hot stone massages and mud baths."

I purred deep in my throat. "That sounds *really* nice."

"Consider it done," she told me, then kissed my cheek and gently hustled me upstairs to bed.

* * * * *

I pulled into a shady parking spot beneath a sprawling spruce tree outside the tranquil-looking spa, blowing out a long breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. The weight of my frantic week seemed to pull on my shoulders, even making my gravity-defying breasts seem to droop. Three dinner shifts at Hooters, classes every morning and labs on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, and rising every day at five a.m. to do my hair and makeup. Plus the gym three times a week, Cynthia's everpresent tests and lab work, and working in a fill on my nails and lashes. Plus homework. I barely had two seconds to myself, much less making any headway on my plans to seduce Jeff.

I checked my texts – Mackenzi's "porn fantasy" seduction of her beloved Richard loomed, and she depended on me to style her – as I walked up the bluestone walkway towards the day spa. Tall, lissome women crisscrossed the lobby wearing fluffy white robes with their hair in artfully messy buns or white turbans, all to the tranquil sound of harp music. A babbling fountain dominated the lobby, drawing my attention to the sound of water over polished stones. I missed the approach of a slender, gorgeous brunette in a tailored business suit, her voice making me jump a little.

"Good morning, welcome to Somnolence," she told me crisply. "Are you Miss Reynolds?"

I smiled, covering my discomfort. "It's Tiffany, please," I told her brightly. "And yes, I am."

She smiled and gestured. "Let's get you checked in, Tiffany," she told me, consulting an expensive tablet computer in the crook of her arm. "Dr. Thorne booked you for the platinum package. You basically have the run of the place. I'll get you a schedule. Anything that strikes your fancy, you just go ahead. A platinum package essentially gives you the run of the place."

The very air of the place seemed to ooze money, I noticed as I followed the receptionist's exquisite ass back to the front desk. Slowly, it dawned on me – the women in the robes who populated the place could only be trophy wives, my own white whale.

The receptionist – her name was Heidi, I discovered – led me to a changing room where I removed my obligatory skin-tight wardrobe and skyscraper heels and changed into a snowy white robe and turban of my own. I forewent immediately diving for a massage and instead gravitated towards the juice bar, hoping to ingratiate myself, perhaps even befriend, one of the

elusive trophy wives who fascinated me so.

A knot of lovely young women with meticulously groomed eyebrows and the best bodies money could buy sat around a cluster of tables, chatting softly. I took a seat nearby, not wanting to intrude but desperate to hear what they discussed.

"...go to St. Bart's, again, but I really do wish we could travel the Continent this year. But Daniel *despises* Italy after that bad hotel experience and has decided that all of Europe is out of the question," one was saying.

"That's so closeminded," another answered. "Devon and I had the most wonderful trip to Copenhagen last year. And the year before, we spent two weeks in Stockholm. Beautiful."

"Oh, not Sweden," another chimed. "Too many *natural* blondes."

They all laughed knowingly.

"God, I needed this," the first one purred, stretching her arms above her head and making her lovely breasts jostle teasingly beneath the robe. "It's been so hectic lately."

"Tell me," the third one added. "Between the fundraising I'm doing, Evan expects what he expects."

"Mm-hmm," the second interjected. "Devon is the same way. He expects the kids to be bathed, fed and off to school, the house clean and dinner ready, my body the same weight it's been since high school even after two kids. All in a tight skirt and heels, and all by the time he gets home from work."

"And don't forget the nightly blowjob," the original speaker laughed.

"I think Daniel would even be willing to give up the sex, so long as dinner's ready."

They all laughed. "Just like my mama told me when I was little," the first one said. "Any girl can suck a dick, boys only marry the one who can do that *and* cook."

Aw, shit, I gotta learn to cook, too? I thought despondently. *Trophy wifing is harder than I thought!*

* * * * *

I returned fairly glowing with relaxation, completely rejuvenated after an idle day of massages and seaweed wraps. Mackenzi texted to tell me she would be there at nine p.m. for her makeover, giving me most of the day to myself.

The day broke warm and sunny, without a cloud in the sky. The calendar on my phone showed my class and work schedules, but the upcoming Friday marked with big pink hearts marked Jeff's birthday. Slowly, an idea formed as I ate my meager breakfast. Trophy wives cooked for their men. Birthdays meant cake. How hard could it be to bake a cake?

I helped myself to Cynthia's – I found myself thinking of her as *mom* more and more – extensive library until I found a promising title. *Baking for Beginners* offered step-by-step instructions and appeared written for a complete idiot. I suited that description fully. I slid it from its niche on a fully laden shelf and cradled it in my arms, taking it downstairs as I looked for a cozy place to read.

Unfortunately, the beautiful early summer day outside beckoned to me. Seizing an impulse, I slid my delicious new body into a newly-purchased sequined bikini and a pair of platform wedges and slung myself into the garden hammock to soak up the sun as I read up on how to bake, smoking cigarettes and thoroughly enjoying myself losing total track of time.



How hard could it be to bake a cake?

I snapped out of a chapter on custard by my phone suddenly erupting with Beyoncé's voice. I looked down and gasped to see the time – two p.m. – above Cynthia's name and picture.

I pressed the phone to my ear with a soft *click* against my earring. “Hey, mom,” I said perkily.

“Good afternoon, darling girl,” she said melodiously. “Have you gotten some rest?”

“I didn't exactly mean to, but yeah,” I told her. “What's up?”

Her voice lost a bit of its singsong quality and became more serious. “It's Jeff,” she said. “He's back in the hospital.”

I sat up, almost upsetting myself from the hammock in my shock. “Oh, God, is he okay?”

“He's fine, I promise,” Cynthia soothed. “It's all a bit complicated, but it seems that his metabolism has become, for want of a better term, dependent on the serum derived from your genetics.”

“Dependent?” I asked. “This doesn't have anything to do with my overdose, does it?”

“I have no way of knowing right now,” she placated. “You mustn't blame yourself. This is all highly experimental science, darling baby. There are literally thousands of factors that might influence this reaction.”

“I'd never forgive myself if I thought I hurt him,” I whined.

“Don't do that to yourself,” she told me. “Anyway, as you have changed, the extracted serum has changed as well. Your cells are changing as a result of your own transformation, so naturally the serum will change at the same rate. Those factors that Jeff's metabolism came to depend on have gradually diminished as your body changed.”

“So Jeff is detoxing?”

“More or less,” Cynthia said. “He's in a state of extreme metabolic insufficiency. His cells aren't manufacturing enough energy to keep him going. He collapsed at school and arrived here by ambulance. I have several ways in mind to reinvigorate his natural metabolism, but they will take time. I expect that Jeff might be here a while.”

“Oh, no, really? But what about his birthday?”

She chuckled richly. “You sweet girl,” she said fondly. “As much as I hate to say it, it won't be the first birthday my little Jeff has celebrated in a hospital.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“Yes, please,” she said. “If you could go to my private office, there are a few file folders underneath my laptop. Could you bring those folders and the laptop to me here at the hospital?”

I stood, tossing my half-smoked cigarette into the bushes. “Of course, mama,” I said immediately. “I'll be right there.”

“Don't rush,” she told me. “Nothing there pertains to Jeff's treatment, that's all on my research server. No, this is a little side project I'm working on, something to help me pass the time while Jeff rests.”

“Oh, okay,” I said. “In that case, I'm gonna bring you a change of clothes and a warm blanket. It sounds like you're gearing up to stay the night.”

“You know me well, baby,” she said. “I'll see you in a little while, then?”

“You bet you will,” I said, tapping the screen to end the call.

* * * * *

By the time I arrived in Jeff's room, not only had I packed changes of clothes for Cynthia and brought her computer and files, I bought her Indian takeout and fresh coffee as well. Her gratitude seemed to make her sag a little. I offered to sit with Jeff, looking very small and fragile in his bed, while she took some time away, but she wouldn't hear of it. Seeing him there, pale and asleep as the machines at his bedside pumped him full of whatever concoction Cynthia dreamed up to sustain him. A nearly overwhelming urge to run to him, to take him in my arms suffused my entire body. I forced myself to be satisfied just taking his hand between mine and pressing a soft kiss onto his forehead.

Cynthia ducked into the bathroom and emerged in a knockaround pair of jeans and a loose sweater, her tailored suit now hanging in the small bathroom. She slumped into the recliner next to Jeff's bed, taking her laptop and the files from the house and spreading them into neat piles on the rolling bed-table. I peered past Jeff's slumbering form over her shoulder.

She brushed a loose strand of hair behind one ear – the first time I'd ever seen a hair out of place on the exquisitely elegant doctor – and looked a bit sheepish. “I'm researching biotech companies,” she explained, gesturing at her work. “When the paperwork finally processes, I will hold several very lucrative patents on the work I've done with you and Jeff. These processes can benefit all of mankind, but they will take additional research and testing before they're ready for clinical trials. I need manpower and resources beyond what I currently have. I was planning to buy a few companies with some brilliant minds and put Jeff in charge as CEO.”

I giggled. “I paint a harsh picture of Jeff as some corporate fat-cat.”

“So do I,” she said. “As a matter of fact, I'd likely disown him if he started behaving that way. I chose him specifically because he wouldn't behave that way. He'll make these discoveries accessible to the public, not priced out of reach for the ultra-rich. He'll use my work to benefit mankind.”

I looked at him with naked affection. “Yeah, he's that kind of guy.”

She regarded me quizzically for a moment. “You're in love with him, aren't you?”

I hoped my tan covered my scarlet blush. “Hopelessly,” I confessed.

“Then bless you both,” she said warmly. “Now, scoot. You have school tomorrow.”

* * * * *

I threaded through the busy next few days in a haze – school and work, plus Mackenzi's makeover which wound up being more helpless giggles than actual sexiness – plus dropping in to check on Jeff and make sure Cynthia slept and ate. By the time Thursday night arrived, after a

particularly busy lunch shift at the restaurant, I needed to fight the urge to flop unconscious onto the sofa, instead opening to my marked page of *Baking for Beginners* and starting my work for Jeff's birthday.

Suddenly, the gleamingly modern and well-appointed kitchen took on the aspect of an alien landscape. I discovered that I didn't even know the names of several items called for in the book, having to take time and look up pictures online before I could identify several necessary utensils. When they wrote for beginners, I supposed they at least assumed a person who knew what a sifter looked like.

What appeared to be so devilishly simple on the printed page proved elusive in practice. For one thing, precise measurements seemed to completely escape me, which boded ill for my upcoming haircoloring class next semester. I quickly discovered that effective cooking precluded any attempt at cutting corners, and my first attempts at batter wound up poured down the disposal and I began to seriously fear running out of eggs, milk and flour. Flecks of dried batter caked my face and clothes from my first disastrous run-in with the hand mixer.

I decided at length to stop taking it all so seriously and opened a bottle of wine. After a few glasses, somehow baking got geometrically easier. Or at least I stopped caring. I turned Katy Perry on the household speakers very loudly and I danced as I stirred and measured.

By the time I made icing on my third attempt, I was thoroughly and happily drunk and treating myself to a very good time. I dreaded cleaning up the stunning mess I'd created, but that would keep until later. In the meantime, I was practicing my sexy shimmy to *Roar* and baking a cake, like any good trophy wife, for my beloved's birthday.



I decided at length to stop taking it all so seriously and opened a bottle of wine.

Just before I became too sloppy drunk to function, I sealed the frosted cake into a Tupperware and staggered upstairs to my bed, leaving Katy Perry to sing to the mess I created, thoroughly satisfied with myself.

* * * * *

Even my super-metabolism couldn't cope with the vagaries of a wine hangover, and I awoke the next day with a pounding head and cottonmouth. I leaned heavily against the wall of the shower, letting the hot water caress my skin as I struggled not to vomit. By the time I got my hair styled and my makeup painstakingly applied, three cups of strong coffee and a huge bottle of water coursed through my digestive tract and inched me a bit closer to feeling human. I managed to find a parking spot for my Jeep – a mighty task at the over-enrolled community college – and slide into my seat with only minutes to spare, taking my first Hairstyling exam through a miserable haze.

By the time class let out and I managed to choke down a few bites of lunch, I started feeling a bit better. I parked at a table in the student union, going through my growing mountain of text and Facebook messages, Instagram IM's and tweets as I fended off the clumsy flirtations of the college boys whose eye I caught. I tried to be as polite as I could – I didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings – but responding to people like Mackenzi, Megan, Jazmin and my new friends from beauty school like Phuong, Kathi and Brandon appealed to me much more than the subtly disguised sexual advances of boys who never realized I was six or seven years older than them.

I bolted out of my Nail Care class as soon as Professor Cooke dismissed us, hustling back to my Jeep as fast as my hot pink Jessica Simpson heels would allow. The drive home seemed to take forever, leaving me feeling breathless and rushed as I changed into a ruched pink cocktail dress and rhinestone choker, repaired my makeup to a near-flawless state and touched up my hair. I made it to Jeff's bedside just as he pushed his meal tray away, cake in hand. Cynthia grinned ear-to-ear at the sight of me, giving him an inflated latex glove on a length of IV tubing and the words "Happy Birthday" scrawled on it in Sharpie.



"Happy Birthday" scrawled on it in Sharpie.

We sang the obligatory song and cracked jokes, but I could feel a change in the air. The way Jeff looked at me, almost like a caress; and the warm, self-satisfied approval beaming from Cynthia's face. I felt a little uncomfortable, but still drawn in, the desire to be close to Jeff like a tractor beam.

That feeling persisted until we cut the cake. I saw them both struggle with pained smiles to compliment my efforts, but I could plainly see my first attempt at baking produced something just this side of inedible. Laughing, I unceremoniously dumped the remainder of the foul cake into the garbage and continued smiling and chuckling as they spit the last bites into napkins.

"Oh, God," Jeff groaned, laughing. "That was *awful*, Tiff."

"Yeah, it really was," I agreed.

"You get points for effort," Cynthia said maternally.

"Not many," Jeff teased.

"She'll get better at it if she practices," Cynthia scolded. "Jeff, be nice."

"It was really sweet of you," he said. "Nobody's ever baked me a cake themselves before."

I sat on the edge of his bed, which Cynthia took as a sign. "I should leave you two alone," she said with a knowing smile directed at me. "I have paperwork to finish, after all, if you want to go home tonight, Jeff."

"Thanks for everything, mom," he said, kissing the back of her hand.

"Don't forget to think Tiffany, too," she said. "None of this would be possible without her."

She left the room, thoughtfully closing the door behind her, leaving me alone and inches from the love of my life, unsure of what to say or what to do with my hands.

"You look really pretty tonight," he said out-of-the-blue.

I brushed hair behind my ear. "Really? You think so?"

He blushed a little, adorably. "Well, mom suggested I tell you that, to be honest," he confessed. "But that doesn't mean it's not true. You look really gorgeous."

I diverted the subject. "And you look really handsome," I said. "My DNA or whatever is really helping you fill out. You're turning into Johnny Muscles over there."

"Just wish I could go more than ten minutes without needing an IV or an injection," he said. "I would never say this in front of my mom, but I am *seriously* sick of fucking hospitals. Once all of this is over, I swear I'm never going near a hospital again."

"Promises, promises," I said.

"So I hear you're driving my old Jeep, now," he said. "You like it?"

"Yeah. I look super cute in it," I told him.

"Well, how 'bout you use it to give me a lift home? I'm gonna get sprung in about an hour. Maybe we can stop off on the way and get a piece of real cake, y'know, not one that was made out of sawdust, tree bark and ink."

I shoved him, laughing. "You are a real asshole sometimes, y'know that?"

"Was that a yes on the ride?" he pressed.

"Of course it was," I said. As much as I didn't want to, I forced myself to say, "I should wait outside and give you a chance to change clothes." Even though every atom of my body ached to

see him out of his clothes.

He pushed himself out of bed, his movements betraying fatigue but an underlying iron will and strength that made him seem even taller than he actually stood. "Yeah, I guess so," he said heavily. "God knows how long it'll take me to put socks on. I feel like I'm a hundred years old."

"Well, you look great for your age," I told him, unable to keep from flirting just a *little* as I slid out the door into the hallway.

The discharge took about an hour, like Jeff predicted, and then we were on our way home. I smoked a grateful cigarette, my first in hours outside the antiseptic confines of the hospital, on the way, trying to ignore Jeff's disapproving looks. I slid into my customary parking spot beside his Jetta and fumbled my keys into the lock, trying to keep from trembling at Jeff's physical nearness.

"Hey, Tiff, can I ask you something?" he said once we stepped inside.

"Sure."

"Why did you do it? The change, then the overdose, now the bombshell curves... why?"

I sighed. "I guess that's really the question, isn't it?"

"I understand if you don't have an answer," he added gently.

"I do have an answer," I said. "I just don't know if I should just blurt it all out at once."

"Try me."

"Okay, well, the first part of the question is easy. I volunteered for this because it would let my body finally fit my soul. Being transgender – it's not some choice you make, but it's not the result of some trauma or defining moment or something. You know it from the day you're born, that something went terribly *wrong*. You don't fit inside your own skin. Every time you pee, every time you get a boner, it's like a stab in the gut. Because it's not supposed to be that way. Then, when your voice changes and you start growing hair all over – a part of you dies. And you're so ashamed. And scared. Terrified of what people would do if they found out. How many friends you'd lose. Who might hurt you, just to hurt you."

"It sounds like hell."

"Parts of it were. Others, not so bad. It didn't dominate everything," I said. "But when your mom offered me a chance to actually have a body to match the way I felt inside, I jumped at it. Even if it turned out to be bullshit, I would've jumped all the same."

"And the overdose?"

"That's hazy," I explained, sitting on the steps leading to my bedroom to bring myself to his eye

level. I crossed my legs at the ankles, dangling one of my platform Louboutins off my toes languidly. "I'm sure I knew why at the time, but that night gets kinda foggy for me. All I really remember is these images of girls. Blondes with big boobs. Maybe it's someone I met, or some image from my childhood, but for some reason I know it has something to do with you."

"Me? How?" he asked.

"No idea," I told him. "But I remember feeling hopeless. Desperate. Something from the basketball game, something must've happened. Next thing I remember is waking up in the hospital."

"And what about the body?" he asked. "We haven't really talked about it, but I *know* mom could've found someplace to put all that implanted tissue other than your chest. I've thought about it a lot, Tiff. You asked to have that body, didn't you?"

I blushed. "Of course I did," I told him.

"Why?"

"Isn't it obvious?" I asked, my voice breaking with anxiety. "Because I hoped it would make you want me."

"Want you? Wait... you mean..."

I put my arms around his neck. "Yes, I mean *that*," I said, pulling him close.



“Because I hoped it would make you want me.”

An electric tingle traveled the length of my body from my scalp to my toes the instant our lips touched. Mine yielded despite being overstuffed with protein-producing implants, crushing a bit against his. Something so very *feminine* shuddered through me at the rough feel of his beard stubble against my smooth, soft chin and cheeks. He didn't pull away but seemed reticent at first; a torturous eternity of seconds elapsed before a warm hand came to rest in the small of my back and he leaned into the kiss, pouring some measure of passion into it. Our tongues intertwined briefly, then we parted to look deeply into one another's eyes.

“I still don't understand,” he whispered, a little breathless.

“Do I really have to spell it out?” I answered, my own breath panting huskily. “I love you, okay? I've loved you since I got here, when you were so sick and frail, and it's only grown as you've grown and gotten healthier. So, there's the answer to your questions. *For you*. The change, the overdose, the gi-normous tits and the blonde hair, all of it – for you.”

He looked at me as if seeing me for the very first time. “You... love me?”

“Yes,” I said. “I tried not to, Jeff, I promise I did. You didn't leave me any choice. And I know you don't feel the same...”

“Who says I don't?” he interrupted.

My breath caught in my throat. "Wait... what?"

"I... I love you, too," he muttered. "You're the best friend I ever had. And then, suddenly, you were and you weren't. You were so much more. I thought you'd run for the hills if I said anything. I was so scared I wouldn't even have you as a friend any more, I couldn't risk it, I just..."

I laid a slender finger across his lips.

"I love you."

"I love you, too."

"Good," I said as I slid off the step and onto my feet. "Now take me upstairs."

I ALL BUT THREW JEFF'S thickly-muscled body into the bed, pausing only to tear off his shirt and climb hungrily on top of him. Our kisses took on a frantic edge as he worked clumsily at the zipper of my dress. Not wanting him to tear it – but secretly *really* wanting him to tear it – I raised up, straddling his belly, and shimmied out of the form-fitting garment, letting my huge breasts bob freely. He captured one of my pink nipples between his lips and sucked, making me gasp and thread my fingers into his hair.

I ground my crotch against his firm belly as he suckled me, first one nipple and then the other, while I moaned and bucked. His strong hands kneaded the firm muscles of my lower back, eliciting a throaty purr. Able to stand it no longer, I took his head in both my hands and pulled him away from my breasts, pressing a savage kiss into his lips as my blonde hair formed a luminous curtain around our faces. I felt his erection poking me deliciously in my buttock, bringing an immense sense of satisfaction. *I made him hard!* I thought triumphantly.

His hands reached around me and began working at his own zipper, making me assert control of myself and take several deep breaths. "Um, honey?" I said softly. "There is gonna be one *teensy* problem."

He swallowed hard, panting. "And that is?"

"Uh... my pussy isn't open yet," I told him.

"I know you're a virgin, Tiff, I promise I'll be..."

I laid a slender finger across his lips. "No, not that," I corrected. "I mean it isn't *open*. As in, there's not a hole there yet where your dick can go."

He looked adorably confused for a moment. "But... what..."

"Relax, sweetheart," I cooed. "I have other holes. I mean, if that's okay with you."

"Seriously? I mean, yeah, it's okay," he stammered. "I didn't think you would want..."

“To suck your cock? Of course I do, silly,” I finished for him, still grinding softly against his washboard abs. “And it's not ideal, no, but I just really need to feel you inside of me. If it can't happen the way I want it to, then I'll take second best.”

I kissed him, biting his bottom lip softly, and locked my eyes on his – emerald into sapphire. “But just 'cause I'm gonna let you fuck me like I was a boy, don't you start thinking I'm a boy, okay?”

He smiled, a smile I'd never seen before but one I immediately knew in my heart belonged only to me. “I could never think that, Tiffany. Not in a million years. You're definitely a girl. My girl.”

With those last two words, I let him have me. Body and soul.

* * * * *

I cuddled closer against him, our skin sticking together by drying sweat. His arms enfolded me like a gentle fortress, making me feel small and fragile and completely safe. I stifled a soft fart – unromantic, to say the least, but unavoidable after what had just happened three times. I wondered if I would ever walk the same again.



With those last two words, I let him have me. Body and soul.

Somewhere behind me, through the haze of love and satisfaction enveloping me, he took my hand. “Are you okay?” he asked softly.

“Dumbest question ever,” I giggled. “I'm so much better than 'okay.' I'm fantastic.”

"I can't believe that actually happened," Jeff sighed. "I mean, I've thought about it, but I never figured it would all come true."

"Disappointed?" I asked.

He laughed. "Not even," he said. "My dreams didn't even come close."

I purred and snuggle against his unyielding chest. "I can't wait until I open up," I said. "To feel you where I want to feel you. Where I need to feel you, actually."

"You didn't like the other way?" he asked.

"I did," I said. "I mean, not at first. It hurt. You're actually pretty big."

"I am? Seriously?" he said, a little astounded.

"I'm no expert," I fibbed. "But yeah. You're a pretty big guy. But once I got used to it, and you started moving it around a little, it started to feel good. Then it started to feel *really* good."

"Did you actually cum, or was that just for show?" he asked me.

"I dunno, sweetie, I've never cum as a girl," I said. "I *think* I did. Or got really close, at any rate. Trust me, Jeff, I will never fake it with you. Ever. I promise."

He sighed and pulled me closer. "So what do we do now?" he asked. "I mean, what do you want?"

"I thought I made that pretty clear," I teased.

He chuckled. "You know what I mean."

"Well, we're probably stuck with boyfriend-girlfriend for a while, at least. But I want the whole shebang, if that's what you're asking," I told him.

"What do you mean by 'the whole shebang?'"

I giggled. "You're gonna make me say it, aren't you? Fine," I *faux*-grumbled. "I want to be your wife, Jeff. Ring on my finger, 'til death do us part. I want to go to furniture stores with you and decorate our house together. I want to have your babies."

"Wow," he said. "That's a lot."

"I know," I said. "But I'm not in the mood to play coy. Not tonight, not laying here naked with your cum dripping out of my ass. You asked me, I told you."

"Wife, huh?" he said dreamily. "I'm trying to imagine what kind of wife you'd be."

I felt a flush of pride as I told him, "A trophy wife."

“What?”

“You heard me. I'm gonna be your perfect little fuck-doll trophy wife. Always made up, hair done, dressed to slay, and ready to fuck you the instant you get home,” I told him. “I want to be more than just your wife – I want to be your property. I want to *belong* to you.”

He cleared his throat. “Are you fucking with me right now?”

I rolled onto his chest, breasts flattening out beneath me, and stared into his eyes. “Jeff, I'm serious. I want the full-on 1950s package. You think for me, you tell me what to do, you make all my decisions for me while I just look pretty and suck your dick. I know it sounds crazy, but it's what I want.”

“You've actually thought about this,” he said in wonder.

“I have. I love you so much, Jeff. I want to be *yours*. Like when you give me that look whenever I smoke a cigarette. I know you don't like it, and if you told me to quit, I would. Except that I would sneak one, every now and again, just so you'd catch me. And then turn me over your knee and spank me. I mean, I know it sounds kinky, but it's deeper than that. I want you to do whatever you want to me, whenever you want it.”

“How deep? I mean, where does this end?” he asked.

“I don't know,” I told him honestly. “But I know if you took possession of me, if you became that husband I want to kneel down to, I would probably only have the limits you set. You need me to fuck somebody to help you close a business deal, then I'll fuck them. Happily. You want to fuck another girl, then I'll seduce her and bring her to you. You can pass me around to all your friends just to prove how much control you have over me, and I'll squeal and cum for them like a little slut. All because it's what you want. That's really all there is to it. I want to give you what you want.”

He gasped. “You got into my computer,” he told me suddenly.

“What do you mean?”

“Before you overdosed,” he continued, rubbing his temples. “You looked at my porn. I have a fetish for bimbo blondes, and you must have seen that. You overdosed and then you've been transforming yourself into a girl just like them. And now you want to act like the girls in the pictures and the videos. Give me what I want. That makes perfect sense now.”

“Not to me,” I said, confused. “And it certainly doesn't change the way I feel.”

“You seriously want to give me that much control over you?”

“You already have that much control over me, baby,” I told him. “I just want to make it honest.”

"Then tell me you love me," he said.

"I love you. So much. With all my heart," I purred.

"Now kiss me," he continued, and I obeyed.

"What next?" I asked when we broke for air.

"I'm not sure," he said. "Something fun, maybe? Like, take this out for a spin?"

"Okay, I'm intrigued," I told him.

"Give me a little while to come up with something," he said. "And we'll see how well you can carry it off. And it will give me the chance to see if I actually like it, okay? In the meantime, just be yourself. I love yourself, and I don't want you to make too many changes. I promise, if we do this, that I'll never make you do anything gross or dangerous or demeaning. I owe you my life, after all."

"It's enough just to hear that you love me," I said.

He pressed a soft kiss into my forehead, inhaling the scent of my hair. "Good," he said. "'Cause you're gonna hear it a *lot*."

* * * * *

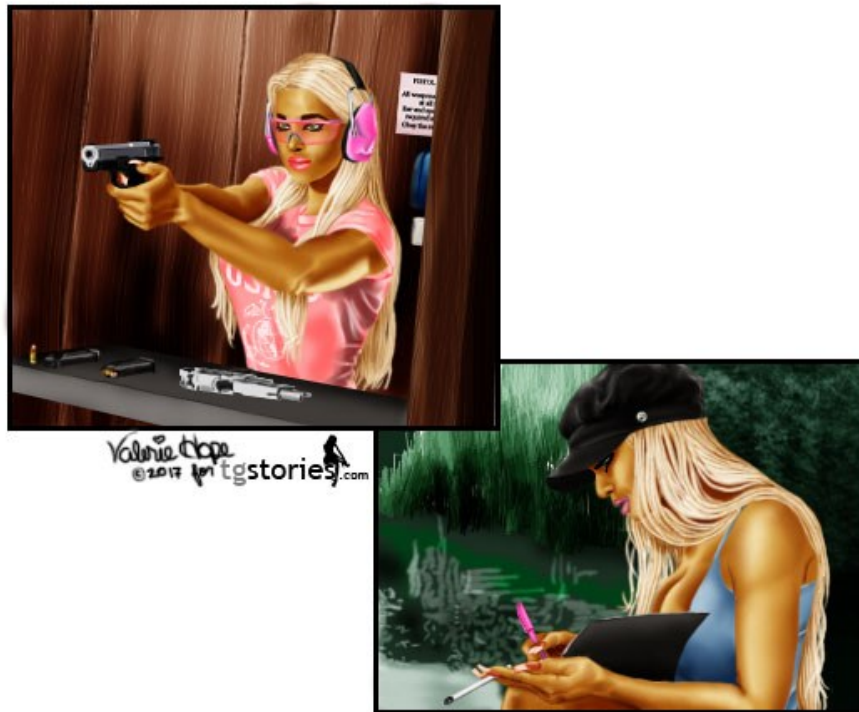
Walking out of the house the next day, going to class and navigating through my daily life, took on a bright and sparkly new cast. People looked at me differently. I couldn't keep the joyous smile from my face. My makeup smelled better, my hair even seemed bouncier and shinier. I was a woman in love. One who was loved in return. My heart swelled to bursting every time I thought about him, remembered his touch, even the teary-eyed pain of his first penetration of me brought a glow to my skin and a secret smile to my inflated lips. I drew eyes everywhere, the extra little wiggle in my hips when I walked, the added bounce of my generous tits beneath my shirt, the playful flip of my hair as I turned.

I only just finished my classes and found a secluded corner off the quad to smoke a cigarette when my phone *dinged* happily to announce a text message. Expecting something lighthearted from Mackenzi, the little flip my heart performed when I saw Jeff's name on the message took me a little by surprise.

I figured out what I want you to do. Learn to talk more like a bimbo. I'll give you 2 days. I love you. Can't wait to see you again.

I giggled and bounced happily. How perfect! I looked like a perfect little Barbie doll, it only fit that I should sound like one as well. But where should I start? I needed to study, to find a frame of reference. I started thinking about who I could use as a role model as I climbed into my Jeep and headed for the place where I did some of my best thinking, from my time as a boy. I pulled into the parking lot of the indoor pistol range a few minutes later, happily itching to try out my

new Glock and Sig Sauer which weighted down my purse. I bought a few boxes of rounds and some adorable pink earmuffs and shooter's glasses at the front, then rented myself a lane and set myself up.



Learn to talk more like a bimbo.

It pleased me no end to see that my groupings remained as tight as ever, hours and hours of practice in the Marine Corps still embedded in the muscle memory of my new, feminine fingers. The rangemaster noticed my accuracy and my flawless range etiquette and gave me a smile and an approving nod, and I felt my nipples stiffen a little bit beneath the padded cups of my push-up bra. *Oh my God, I thought breathlessly, looking down to reload so I could hide my sudden blush. I think he's cute! Jesus, what did Jeff's cock do to me? He sticks it inside me and all of a sudden I'm straight and start thinking boys are cute? Did he really, actually, literally make a woman out of me?*

I headed immediately to my favorite bench in the nearby park and scribbled in my journal for an hour or so, trying to think of bimbo role models to pattern my speech after, trying to process my newfound attraction to my former gender – but it devolved into writing girlish things like “Mrs. Jeff Thorne” and “Tiffany Reynolds-Thorne” with pink hearts around it and bringing a huge smile to my face.

I spent the rest of the day in my normal routine – working out, tanning and a virtually nonexistent lunch (a side salad at a local café where I pushed the plate away half-finished) with a relaxing glass of wine. I finally decided to cast a wide net and simply go back to the school and listen to the other girls for a while.

I gravitated to the sports fields, drawn by the color and confidence of the school's cheerleading

squad. I sat down on the bleachers nearby, hugging my knees and letting my phone record whatever conversations I could overhear without appearing creepy. After an hour and half, I moved on to the cosmetology lab and did the same thing while I practiced my hair-coloring technique on a wig head. By the time I got back from the gym – recording a few of the personal trainers in the break room and a couple girls chatting side-by-side on the treadmills, I had several hours of conversations to get through. I knew Jeff would be at his evening class tonight, and Mackenzi was out with her man, so I had the run of the house until late. I popped in my earbuds and started listening, zoning out happily as I did a load of laundry and practiced some of the turns of phrase and vocal inflections in my recordings.

I woke up late, ears stinging from the earbuds I accidentally forgot to remove, and peeled my face from my laptop keyboard where I'd been researching verbal techniques like 'up-talk' and 'vocal fry.' The first pink feathers of dawn shredded the indigo of night in the east through my curtains, so I showered and set myself to the day's makeup and hair. I only had one class today, and an evening shift at Hooters, which left me ample time to practice my new foray into bimbo-speak. I decided the true litmus test would be my shift at work. Ordinarily, on a weeknight, I came home with somewhere around \$80 in tips. I planned to see if my new way of talking could bring that total up by any margin. If I netted around \$20 more, I would consider it a success. If not, I still had work to do. But I needed to debut it in a safer space, a place where nobody really knew me.

I barely remembered class as I made my way to a big-box electronics store across town where I never shopped. I hoped the institutional sexism of places like this – 'let me help you, little lady' – would work in my favor. I sat and settled myself in the parking lot – which I did with two cigarettes and a Xanax – and mentally prepared, then checked my face in the rearview mirror to perfect my makeup and adopt the widest, most clueless eyes I possibly could. I tossed the lipstick-stained butt of my super-slim cigarette beneath my car and popped a huge piece of bubblegum in my mouth as I sashayed into the store and making a bee-line for the computer section.

A pudgy but cute young man with reddish-brown curls and Radar O'Reilly glasses approached me first as I browsed the racks. His nametag branded him "Matt." He offered me a shy smile, which I returned with my high-beam, toothiest best.

"Can I help you find something?" he asked throatily.

I wound a strand of blonde hair around one finger and smacked my gum. "Yeah, um... so, I need, like, a webcam for my laptop," I said, inflecting every phrase with up-talk and making even my statements sound like questions. I gave him my most wide-eyed look. "Do you have those?"

He settled into the nerdy confidence of being in his element. "Sure do, they're right over here," he told me, gesturing to the end of the aisle. "Do you know what kind you want?"

I breathed out and giggled, looking vacant. "Um... there are different kinds?"

"Well, sure," he said. "You have to think about how you want to hook it up, whether you want to use USB or FireWire or write directly to an external drive. There's also resolution and frame

rate to consider. Are you interested in stuff like high definition or autofocus?"

I visibly 'zoned out' while he talked, looking at something shiny on the shelves, then returned my attention to him when he stopped talking and offered a clueless smile. "Um, I guess, like, I should maybe show you my laptop 'n' stuff?"

He nodded happily, so *glad* to have me as a customer. I wrinkled my nose at him, then offered him a very nice view of my cleavage as I bent a little to retrieve my MacBook from the little satchel I carried beneath my purse. "I'm really glad you're here," I told him flirtatiously. "I seriously don't know anything about computers 'n' stuff."

"That's okay," he told me. "I can help you out. What do you want it for?"

"You're gonna laugh," I told him, giving his arm a playful little push.

"I promise I won't," Matt replied.

"Um... ohmyGawd, this is embarrassing! My boyfriend is studying abroad, 'kay? So he's in Spain right now 'n' I totally want to Skype with him, but, y'know, like... kinda sexy?" I said.

"I get it," he told me knowingly. The subtle little shift in his stance betrayed his growing erection, and I felt the same sense of triumph as before, just not quite as acute or satisfying as it had been with Jeff.

"So, I need a webcam that I can, like, y'know... strip to?" I told him, blushing scarlet. "OhmyGawd, do you think I'm a total slut or what?"

He laughed through his nervous blush. "No, I think that's awesome," he said. "Your boyfriend is really lucky to have a girl who'd do that for him."

"Oh, I bet your girlfriend would do it for you," I said teasingly.

He looked a little crestfallen. "I don't really have a girlfriend right now," he said.

I offered him my hundred-watt smile. "Oh, I'm sorry, baby, I didn't mean to rub it in! Seriously? A cute guy like you, as smart as you are?" I gushed. "You don't need to worry at *all*, sweetie. You're not gonna be single for, like, two seconds. Totally. You're a *doll*."

His smile blossomed from deep inside. "Wow. Thanks," he said.

I twirled my hair again and cocked one hip, shifting from one foot to the next coquettishly. "So, um... like, the webcam?"

He snapped from his happy daydream. "Oh, right. Sorry. Well, for something like that, you're definitely gonna want something high-def. It costs a little more, but 1080p is the way to go..."

* * * * *

“Encouraged” paled, as a word, beside the groundswell of bimbo confidence surging inside me as I left the store with *way* more electronics than I probably should've bought. Matt guided me through the world of peripherals – *way too complicated for a ditz like me, I'm just a girl* – and I decided to pad his commission a little bit as I flirted and played clueless. The raw sense of power I felt, manipulating him like that – before, I'd thought that playing dumb might make me weaker. Now, I knew differently. I could use it as the source of my strength. What started out as a fun little game between Jeff and me turned out to have potential to reshape my life. And it felt so *good* not to fight the lapses in concentration and focus from my overdose for once. If I wanted to trail off or zone out or not comprehend something, I just did it. I'd never felt so relaxed. So utterly *myself*.

I pulled into Hooters just shy of being late for my shift, I'd spent so long in the store. I only had time to puff down a quick cigarette before I clocked in, changed into my uniform and fixed my hair and makeup. Full to the brim of bimbo confidence, I hustled to my first table with wide eyes and a girlish bounce, saying, “Hi! Welcome to Hooters, I'm Tiffany 'n' I'm gonna be, like, your server tonight!”

I gave in and ran with it, foregoing all the hard work of maintaining my concentration and fighting the effects of my overdose. I let myself search for words. I fucked up people's orders. I forgot stuff. And *nobody cared*, as long as I smiled and twirled my hair and giggled and paid people compliments. Over the course of the evening, I shifted from “Welcome to Hooters” all the way to “Hey, handsome, welcome to Hooters.” I flirted. I complimented. I bubbled and gushed. I didn't get jokes and I zoned out when things got complicated. And I felt *wonderful*. As happy as I'd felt when I began my transformation, this newest transformation added that much again. And knowing all of this served to make my Jeff happy with me, make him want me more...



"Hey, handsome, welcome to Hooters."

I could scarcely contain the sheer joy I felt with every breath as I wended through the thickening crowd to yet another table. I brought myself up short when I noticed a familiar face.

"OhmyGawd!" I said, bouncing happily. "Matt! Remember me? You helped me buy a webcam 'n' stuff today! It's Tiffany!"

He blushed again. "Hi," he said. "I didn't know you worked here. Um, this is Ricky, he works at GameStop over by where I work." He pointed absently at a skinny friend across from him who seemed incapable of speech while staring at my barely-covered breasts just inches from his nose.

I bent down next to him, one arm around his broad shoulders, and snapped a quick 'selfie' with my phone to mark the moment. Matt seemed flustered and rattled but genuinely happy.

"Oh, awesome!" I giggled. "Now I totally get to help *you* out like you helped me! What can I get you guys to drink?"

I took their order and bounced peppily to the counter to start their ticket and send it back to the kitchen when Amanda, the petite little brunette bartender, leaned close and pointed back to the table. "Do you know that guy? He's totally staring at you."

I waved a hand airily. "Oh, sure," I said. "That's my friend Matt."

"He's looking at you like he wants to do you right on that table, girl," Amanda said chucklingly.

I seized upon an idea, leaning across the counter to flatten my breasts against the wood, kissing distance of Amanda's pretty face. "Been there, done that," I whispered.

"Seriously?" Amanda said. "He seems, I dunno..."

"Yeah, we got that a lot," I said. "I was out of his league 'n' stuff, all that shit. But I didn't care. I mean, like, he may not look like much, but if you had *any* idea what that boy can do in a bedroom... let's just say you won't give a shit about a few extra pounds, y'know?"

Amanda's mouth formed a perfect O of shock and surprise. "Him? Really?"

I nodded. "You interested? He's single," I said. "I can introduce you."

She tapped her bottom lip consideringly. "He is kinda cute, in a Seth Rogen kind of way," she said.

"And really romantic," I added. "Makes you feel like a total princess."

Amanda tried to play it cool but I could see the change in her eyes. "Yeah, what the hell?" she said, obviously looking at the rotund sales clerk in a much more appraising light. "What do I have to lose?"

She came around the bar and I threaded my arm through hers. "Relax," I giggled. "You're totally gonna love him. He's a sweetie-pie."

Happy to be able to pay back the boy who opened the door to my inner bimbo-ness, I dragged Amanda over to his table so I could introduce Matt to his cute, sexy prospective girlfriend for the very first time. I hoped he didn't blow it. Word around the restaurant was that Amanda was a real firecracker in the sack, and something like that really couldn't happen to a nicer guy.

* * * * *

My experiment paid off in spades – I raked in \$140 in tips and had the time of my life. By the time we finally mopped the floors and locked the doors, I plopped my tired but very happy butt into the driver's seat of my Jeep at half past midnight. Not even bothering to remove my makeup when I arrived home, I dropped my purse onto the chair by my door unceremoniously and changed out of my clothes into a loose sweatshirt with the neck cut out. Silently, my bare feet so conditioned to heels now that I walked perpetually on tiptoe, I padded across the hallway and pushed open the door to Jeff's room. He buried his face into the pillow a bit as the rectangle of light from the doorway spilled across his now-rugged face. I closed the door behind me and padded to his side, trailing my manicured fingernails across the bedspread.



I raked in \$140 in tips and had the time of my life.

He stirred a bit at my approach, opening sleep-thick eyes. “Tiffany?” he mumbled.

I twirled my hair. “So, um... I wanted to, like, tell you that this is how I talk now 'n' stuff,” I lilted.

His eyes widened and I could see the prodigious outline of his cock stir beneath the covers. “You did that today?” he asked, sleepy but amazed.

“Duh,” I said, looking up and to the left as I shifted from foot to foot. “You were all like, 'two days' and I was all like, 'whatever.' When my Daddy says do something, I fuckin' *do* it, y'know?”

His eyes narrowed a bit and took on a hungry light. “What did you just call me?”

I gave him my most wide-eyed, adorable pout. “Um... what? You mean 'Daddy?' 'Cuz that's, like, how I started thinking about you today. I'm a good little girl 'n' I *sooo* love my Daddy. I wanna do whatever he says 'n' shit.”

I felt something close around me as he leaned towards me, something scary and arousing but at the same time deep and infinitely comforting. In that moment, I got my wish. I was his *possession*. My heart did backflips in my chest. “Is it okay, y'know? That I, like, call you Daddy 'n' stuff?”

“I want you,” he said throatily. It was not a question. “Tell me how.”

I knelt next to his bed and rubbed my hand across his broad, well-muscled chest. "I want you inside me," I purred, still keeping my bimbo lilt even as my tone changed to one of desire. "I wanna suck your big, fat cock until it's nice and hard, and then I want you to ram it in my little pink asshole until I fucking scream. I want you to fuck me hard and pull my hair and make me call you Daddy. I totally want you to make me your little anal bitch tonight."

He threw back the covers, exposing his fully erect cock bobbing softly in the ambient light. I gasped a little. Perhaps I imagined it, but it seemed to have grown somewhat in the twenty-four hours since I last saw it. I wondered if I could even fit it inside my mouth, much less my anus. But if Daddy desired it, I would endure no end of pain trying, now that I knew in my bones that I belonged to him.

I flicked my shirt over my head, letting the light from the window limn the luscious outlines of my naked body, and rose to my feet, taking up a comfortable place between his legs and stroking his proud cock softly, rubbing it against my cheek and drinking in its warmth.

I bit my bottom lip. "Um, can I ask you for something, Daddy?" I whined.

"Anything, Princess," he replied.

"Do you love me?" I asked. "Am I beautiful?"

He stroked my cheek and I melted. "You're the most beautiful girl I've even seen. My perfect little Tiffany," he said with depthless gentleness. "And I love you with all my heart."

I giggled. "I love you, too," I said happily, and wrapped my lips softly around his cock.

* * * * *

For the first time in my life, I woke up next to another man and didn't feel any sense of panic. During my homeless days, waking up with someone near you caused immediate and very real alarm. But not this time. I felt safe, and warm, and *loved*. His breath caressed the small sliver of skin exposed by the fall of my long blonde hair and his iron-muscled arm pulled me close. I snuggled into his embrace happily, making him stir and grunt softly.

His arm moved to release me and I pulled it back, thrilled at how easily he could overcome my strength if he so desired. "No, don't," I whispered. "Let me lay like this just a little while longer."

He kissed my earlobe, making me squirm a little. "Are you okay?"

"Of course," I said. "I mean, it got a little rough last night, but I wanted it. You're not gonna break me, baby, I promise."

"That was kinda fun," he said. "But I don't know if I want a constant diet of it."

"How come?" I lilted, still not backing off the bimbo voice I discovered at his command.

"It's not really me, for one thing. Bossing you around and being rough and pulling your hair might be fun for a night, but that's not really how I want to show you I love you. I'm more of a holding hands kind of guy, when it gets right down to it."

"Sounds nice," I said.

"Tell you what," he told me. "Let's cut class today. I know you have to work tonight, but let's spend the morning together. Let's go out and actually be boyfriend and girlfriend. Act like it. Hold hands and kiss each other where people can see us."

"You're so sweet," I said. "That sounds sooo great. I've never been anybody's girlfriend before."

"And I've never been anybody's boyfriend. So we'll make it up as we go along. Let's go do couple stuff," he said. "Go buy towels or look at dishes. Shop for groceries together."

"You mean play house?" I giggled.

"Yeah, I guess I do," he said.

My voice got very high-pitched and little-girl plaintive. "Can I tell people you're my husband?" I asked softly.

"Would that make you happy, baby?"

"Just thinking about it almost makes me cry," I breathed.

"I want to tell you something, and I want you to promise me that you'll never forget it," he told me seriously. "Tiffany, anything that makes you happy is okay with me. Anything. I'm not going to be that kind of guy, even if you do need me to be Daddy. You want the diamond ring, you get the diamond ring. Or the Porsche, or the designer purse or shoes. You want someone else to fuck –" his voice momentarily lost power – "then you get a hotel room and fuck him. Just as long as you always love me, I'm okay with anything else if it makes you happy."

I rolled over in his embrace, meeting him eye-to-eye with only fractions of an inch between us. "I probably brought that on myself, y'know, talking about being your trophy wife 'n' stuff, yesterday," I said, as serious as my bimbo-speak would allow me to sound. "But I don't like hearing you talk about me cheating on you, 'kay? I'm yours, Jeff. I would never do that. Whatever else happens, you have to believe that. The world is full of cute boys and hot girls, but out of all of them, I only want you."

He let out a deeply-held breath. "I was hoping you'd say that," he told me. "I just didn't want you to feel like I was gonna hold you back."

"Hold me back? What the fuck, babe?"

"You're new to this girl thing," he explained. "I can't imagine what must be going through your mind at any given moment. I just figured, well – maybe you might *need* to do something with

somebody who isn't me. Just to help you figure stuff out. Sorry if that was out of line.”

“It wasn't,” I said. “It's actually really sweet, babe. And, like, cards on the table 'n' stuff, I tried that. It's how I learned to suck cock. 'Cuz I didn't want you, like, thinking I was some nervous virgin who didn't know what she was doing.”

“Seriously?” he asked, more curious than shocked.

I nodded. “Mm-hm. Made it through about, like, three different guys before I finally decided, like, this isn't for me. I mean, the whole lead-up was fun 'n' shit, but the only cock I *wanted* to suck was yours. I was, like, kinda forcing myself the rest of the time, y'know?”

“Wow,” he said. “I had no idea. It's kinda cool, and kinda scary, all at the same time. And I'm a little jealous, honestly. You're not just the first girl I ever slept with, you're the first girl I ever kissed. Or loved. You're all my first times.”

“You're really romantic,” I told him. “But as much as I wanna lie here in your arms all day, I'm not letting you wriggle out of doing couple stuff like you promised. So go get cleaned up. I gotta go do my makeup and fix my hair. 'Cuz today you're mine.”

“I like the sound of that,” he said.

* * * * *

We spent the morning holding hands and stealing kisses, browsing through 'couple' stores like Bed, Bath and Beyond and Costco. We got in little innocent arguments about what things would go where and what we needed for this room or that room. I always kowtowed at the end – he was the boss, he made all the decisions and it was my job to be pretty and obedient – and loved the feeling of always bowing to his will like a good possession, like any trophy wife would. I loved the jealous looks from the corners of eyes we got, from men who desired me and hated Jeff for having me, or from women who wanted my big strong hunk of a man and hated me for having him. The shop clerks deferred to him but secretly courted my approval, just like they would for a couple where the man controlled the checkbook but the woman kept the home.

In no part of my life did I remember ever being happier. I felt no fear of marriage or commitment to Jeff. It just seemed like a logical extension of what we already made together.

He obliged me in a round of window-shopping at some high-end boutique stores and even dogged my heels on a turn through the shoe store. I begged him with my most adorable pout for a pair of spike-heeled Louboutins and got an incredible thrill when he sternly told me 'no' and made me put them back. I got the pleasure of pouting and acting sullen for a while until he pressed me against a wall and kissed me breathless, dissolving me into giggles.

“Is this what it's gonna be like?” he asked, taking my hand as we headed down a sunlit alley towards the parking structure where Jeff's Jetta waited. We could have taken my Jeep, but no way was I in a relationship where my man didn't drive.

"Is *what* gonna be like?" I asked.

"Being married," he said.



"Is this what it's gonna be like?"

"I dunno," I told him. "I guess it's whatever we decide to make it."

"Then I want to make it just like this," he said.

I raked a hand through my hair. "Are you asking?"

"Well, yeah. I guess. But not proposing. I'm gonna make a big deal out of proposing," he said.

I blushed and surrendered to a barrage of happy daydreams for a moment. "Well, if you're asking, then my answer is 'yes,' baby," I told him dreamily. "Of course I'll marry you."

I PAWED THE 'STOP' BUTTON on the treadmill when the ring of my phone broke through the playlist on my earbuds. I toweled myself off and warmed down to a stop as I pressed my phone against my ear.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Tiff," a familiar voice said on the other end of the line.

"Mackenzi! What's up, baby?" I said happily.

"You sound different," she told me.

"It's a long story 'n' stuff, sweetie, but I'm gonna tell you everything, 'kay?" I explained.

"You better. But anyway, I just got back from Cabo," she told me. "Flew in last night. Richard took me away for a long weekend."

I squealed. "OhmyGawd, how romantic is that?" I said. "I'm so happy for you!"

"Hey, I wanted to know if you wanted to meet for lunch," she said. "I have so much to tell you."

I clicked my tongue stud against my teeth a couple times. "I have class until two, can we make it coffee, instead?" I asked.

"Sure, whatever works for you, I'm free all day," she told me. "You should be graduating soon, right?"

"In a month," I told her. "I'm gonna be, like, Tiffany Reynolds, apprentice cosmetologist and aesthetician."

"That's really cool," Mackenzi said. "Hey, I have a few errands I need to run. Can't wait to catch up. See you at two, okay?"

"Yep!" I chirped happily. "Love ya!"

I replaced my phone in its arm-band and tucked my earbuds back in place. I still had ten minutes of cardio left in my workout and I didn't plan on skimping. Anything to keep my body the stuff of Jeff's wet-dreams. But the fatigue and soreness of the workout faded to nothing. I was young, hot, in love and now my bestie was back in town. Nothing was gonna get *this bitch* down.

* * * * *

I met Mackenzi shortly after my lab – two solid hours of doing acrylic nails, which should have been boring but oddly wasn't – at a *chic* little coffee shop about three blocks from campus. Just secluded enough for people to get work done but pricey enough to dissuade the college kids and hipsters. I wrapped her in a huge hug – my diminished height gave me a lovely face full of her pert breasts – and settled down to a table. She already had her customary cappuccino and ordered me my favorite chocolate caramel macchiato, and a blueberry muffin stood between our cups ready to be shared.

"I really missed you," I told her, taking her hand as she sat across from me.

"Aw, I missed you, too, Tiff," she said. "So, anyway..."

She gave a very meaningful look at her hand in mine. I looked down, opening my grip a bit, to reveal the sizeable diamond now gleaming on her ring finger.

I gasped, unable to speak, and covered my gaping mouth with my hands. “He didn't.”

“He did,” she said with a satisfied smile. “And I said 'yes.'”

“OhmyGawdohmyGawdohmyGawd!” I squealed, almost knocking the table over in my haste to hug her and kiss her cheeks. “When? Where? How did he do it?”

“On the beach, at sunset,” she said, her eyes faraway. “Nothing fancy, that isn't his style. He just kissed me, told me he loved me and that he wanted to be with me forever. Then he knelt down and just asked.”

“Simple and perfect,” I told her.

“Absolutely,” she said. “And all this because I was working up the courage to tell him my *other* news.”

“Other... shut the fuck up. You're fucking kidding me.”

“Six weeks along,” she said. “I'm gonna be a mommy.”

“Jesus, Mackenzi! I let you out of my sight for, like, a *week*...”

She laughed. “I know, right? Engaged and knocked up. But happy. My God, Tiff – so happy.”

“And he's in? With the baby 'n' stuff?”

“Of course he is,” she said. “One hundred percent. Which means you're on the hook, babe. Gonna need a maid of honor *and* a godmother.”

I blew a raspberry. “Like you even have to ask.”

“I knew you'd be happy for me,” she said. “My mom freaked out. So did my sister. But I knew I could count on you.”

“That's what best friends are for!” I piped in.

“But look at you,” she said. “You look different. You sound different. What's up?”

“Um... so, there's been a *development*,” I said. “I'm, um... sorta with somebody.”

“You and Jeff?”

I nodded. “Turns out he felt the same way about me. The whole time.”

“And you and he have... y'know...”

“Well, *sorta*,” I told her. “Which leads me to what I was gonna ask you. I need a favor.”

* * * * *

“You're sure about this,” Mackenzi asked me for the dozenth time.

“Yeah,” I told her, looking over the bizarre instrument in my hand. “Cynthia okayed it. She encouraged it, actually. Bunch of stuff about endometriosis and healing time. I didn't have the heart to tell her that there's nothing medical about it, I just want to pussy-fuck her son.”

“So, we're gonna go slow,” Mackenzi said. “And use a lot of lube. I talked to Cynthia, too, baby. It hurt when I popped my cherry when I was a teenager. Cynthia says the membrane over your vagina is about three times as thick, and you have a cherry behind it. She thinks you're gonna be in for a lot of pain.”

I examined the 6” dildo in my hand. Even though Jeff's cock was remarkably bigger, it still looked fucking *immense* when I considered what I intended to do with it. “Worth it,” I said.

“You must really love him,” Mackenzi commented, upending a bottle of Astroglide over the head of the rubber cock. I started smearing it all over.

“I really do,” I said. The dildo glistened with a thick coat of slippery lubricant. “What now?”

Mackenzi laughed. “Well, you finally managed to get me naked and touching you, didn't you?” she teased, setting aside her own dildo – a 7” blue thing she called “Big Papa” – momentarily to smear a large glob of lube onto my proto-pussy, separating the labia that was once my scrotum and feeling for the slight indentation which would lead to my vagina. I still felt a little numb – my visit to Cynthia had not been purely academic. She put me in the stirrups – another feminine ‘first’ for me – and numbed the area thoroughly with novocaine. She'd made several punctures in the membrane covering my vagina with a long needle, “to make sure it tore properly,” and the anesthetic still hadn't worn completely off.

Mackenzi took Big Papa back in her hand and smeared it with the excess lubricant. “I like to start out by just rubbing it around, getting it warm,” she said, demonstrating as she sat next to me on the couch in her apartment. “Get things purring, y'know?”

I nodded, finding the tiny little nub of my clitoris – also not fully developed yet, according to Cynthia, but far enough along to function – and rubbing gently until I started to feel a little melty. I used my fingers to keep the labia separated, giving access to all my ‘fun parts’ and the gentle stroke of the rubber cock.

“Now find the opening,” she told me, still rubbing herself. Her erect nipples – which I desperately wanted to suck but controlled my urges – betrayed her arousal. Big Papa obviously got Mackenzi's motor running in short order. “It may be a little harder with you, but you'll feel the head just slip into place, right where it needs to go.”

I jimmied it around a bit until I felt the head settle into an indentation. I could almost visualize

the hollow area inside me, just beyond the flap of skin and tissue, waiting for the blunt head to poke through and give access to the innermost me.

“Now, gentle and easy, start to press. No sudden movements, just steady.”

She demonstrated, and bit back a moan as the length of the dildo in her hand slid into her slightly. She rocked it back and forth a little bit, heightening her sensation for a moment before withdrawing it. The intense look of pleasure on her face just made me want it inside me more. I pressed a bit too hard, hissing in pain, but started again without prompting. I would push until the pain reached the limits of what I could bear. The flesh of my crotch stretched viciously. I would hold at that point, just shy of intolerable, until the limits of what I could take expanded. Then I would add more pressure.

After what seemed like hours but the clock said were only minutes, I felt something start to tear. The dull, aching pressure and painful stretching gave way to burning and stinging. The towel beneath my backside darkened and dampened with blood.

Mackenzi, feeling just the opposite as she played with her own toy, put her hand on my wrist, a look of concern breaking through the slack mask of pleasure on her face as I groaned and whimpered. “You can stop, honey, if it's too much,” she said softly.



You can stop, honey, if it's too much," she said softly.

“Nuh-uh,” I groaned. “I want it *in*, goddammit!” Tears leaked down my cheeks.

“Baby, you're hurting yourself,” she cautioned.

"I'm not stopping, Mack," I told her breathlessly, breath coming only in ragged gasps. More blood flowed. "I'm not leaving this fucking couch until I'm a woman, okay?"

She looked at the determination on my pretty doll's face and nodded. "Then push. Hard."

I bit my lip until it bled. "Oh, *fuck* this hurts," I panted.

"Push, Tiff!" Mackenzi urged.

I finally wormed my hand down far enough to hook my index finger around the back of the dildo. I gulped deep breaths for a moment, then gritted my teeth and shoved straight into the center of the webwork of pain by lower abdomen had become. With a sickening slurp and a blindingly painful tearing sensation, the dildo leapt in my hand, slipping deep inside me with no resistance whatsoever. I gasped, but this time not in pain. As the blunt head of the rubber cock came to rest against my cervix, it hit nerve endings I didn't even know I had. Really *good* nerve endings. As if receiving permission at last, my clitoris swelled and stretched, finally emerging for the first time from beneath its hood – my 'spare' fingers found it and the sensation made my back go stiff with unfamiliar pleasure.

I sagged against the couch, weeping. "Did I do it? Is it in?"

Mackenzi gave me a triumphant smile. "Balls deep," she confirmed.

"I'm... I'm just... gonna... leave it there... just... for a second," I panted.

Mackenzi pushed herself up on one elbow, laying Big Papa on the coffee table, her own pleasure forgotten momentarily. "You did great, baby," she said proudly. "Did Cynthia tell you what to expect now?"

"Yeah," I said, trying to change the position of my backside but dissuaded by the sharp pain still lingering. "Even with her drawing off what she could, I still have, like, eight or nine menstrual periods stored up in there. I'm gonna bleed for a while, and she said it's gonna burn and stink real bad."

Mackenzi gestured to a plastic sack on her kitchen table. "I got you some tampons and maxi-pads," she said. "They'll at least save your clothes. There's a couple douches in there, too, if you want to try them. I can show you how they work."

I pulled out the blood-smearred dildo delicately and laid it on the towel, completely wrung out and devoid of energy. "Whatever it takes," I told her. "Just so I can be with Jeff."

"If that boy only knew what you went through for him," Mackenzi said.

"He does, and he's totally grateful," I told her. "Jeff's not like other boys, 'kay? He's special."

"I know he is, baby," Mackenzi said. "I just didn't like seeing you hurting like that."

“Well, how you think I'm gonna feel when you have that baby?” I countered. “Us girls have to get used to stuff like that.”

“Yeah, you're right,” she told me. She took my hand. “You are almost impossibly brave, you know that? You leave me completely speechless. Half the shit you've done – I would have run screaming.”

I blushed, making me look mottled. “No, you wouldn't,” I said. “You're stronger than that.”

“It's great that you think so,” she said. “But seriously. You're *the* most amazing woman.”

“I love you, Mack,” I told her gratefully. “Could I, like, ask you another favor?”

“Sure, baby, anything,” she said.

“Can you, like, show me how to put in one of those tampons? I'm about ten seconds from fucking up your couch,” I told her. “I'd get it myself, but I *totally* don't think I can move right now.”

* * * * *

I kept my newfound womanhood a secret from Jeff, sneaking into his room at night and offering only my mouth, my hands or my anus like before while the dregs of my pent-up menstrual cycle drained slowly out of me. As the tissue around my opening healed, I began to notice all-new sensations when I did simple things like jog or climb stairs. And free of the confining membrane which kept my womanhood sealed, my clitoris swelled and swelled, making its own presence known in thrilling, delicious ways. I resisted the temptation to play with it – I wanted my first orgasm to be a gift from Jeff, not from my fingers.

I muddled through the week, changing tampons and pads almost hourly as my body expelled the fetid remnants of several uterine linings. Finding joy in anything – from Jeff's touch to the covetous looks I got at work from my customers – became a task in and of itself. Thank goodness for Jeff's bimbo command. I might have been a snarling, grouchy bitch if Jeff didn't expect me to be a happy, clueless little airhead every minute.

The high point of my week came when I managed to get to the top of the list for the cosmetology class lab and get my hair bleached and my extensions redone. I opted for honest-to-goodness unicorn hair, thick and full and down to my waist like Barbie. The girl, Corinne, who did it for me outdid herself, and I paid her oceans of compliments on the results. I couldn't keep my hands out of the soft, bouncy fullness which caressed my face and shoulders every time I turned or faced into a breeze. I lost myself that evening in my hairstyling textbook, experimenting with styles and braids and different ways to wear it. I resolved to let my own hair grow – one day, I hoped to put an end to extensions and have it be my own luxuriant hair down to my waist. The power-packed vitamins that Cynthia fed me daily made my hair grow at an abnormally fast rate, so I estimated only a few months before I could just use clip-ins for volume when I wanted something special.

When my period-to-end-all-periods finally stopped, I treated myself to a final vinegar and water douche and played with myself extensively under the shower, stopping just shy of orgasm several times. Only tingling pleasure answered my touch, no more sharp pain to surprise me. I vaguely recalled the process I'd just unintentionally undergone being called *edging* on some of the more extreme “bimbofication” sites I frequented, a technique designed to keep women aroused and pliable by their masters. I could unequivocally say it worked like a charm. My hands trembled as I re-applied my makeup and teased out my glorious hair, and I managed a quick text to Jeff as I wrapped myself in a fluffy white robe.

R u coming home soon baby? I miss u.

In typical “good boyfriend” fashion, I didn't have to wait long for his reply – he dropped everything to answer when I texted him.

Only a few more minutes, sweetheart. I miss you too.

I smiled my secret smile and set my thumbs back to work.

Meet me in the library upstairs OK? I have something 2 show u.

My phone *dinged* merrily in response, seconds later.

A surprise?

I giggled. **U know it baby! Hurry home!**



I giggled. U know it baby! Hurry home!

I waited alone in the dark, posed carefully on Cynthia's Victorian couch, in the antique library, barely able to contain my excitement as I heard the downstairs door shut and the *flop* of Jeff's satchel on the tiles, then his heavy tread up the stairs. The door opened and I raised up, making smoldering eye contact at his back-lit form.

"Surprise," I purred at him.

"You look amazing," he said, his eyes caressing me every bit as effectively as his hands could. He took me in, from my luxurious mane of chalk-white hair to my flawless makeup, my rock-hard breasts and tiny waist, bubble-butt and long, skinny legs clad in black stockings and capped with Louboutin stilettos.

"For you, always, Daddy," I cooed at him. "But that's not the real surprise. Wanna know what it is?"

He walked in and shut the door behind him, clicking on an antique Tiffany lamp beside the door to cast the room in a warmer light. "Of course, Princess," he said, loosening his top button.

I rolled onto my backside as gracefully as a swan, kicking my legs high into the air to expose my brand-new, untested pussy. With a lascivious grin, I sucked my middle finger wantonly and slid it

between my thighs, inserting it up to the knuckle in warm, pink womanhood as Jeff watched.

“You're open?” he asked in a small voice.

“Wet and ready,” I told him. “I can finally have you the way I want.”

He crossed the distance to me deceptively fast, kneeling over me and pressing a desperate kiss into my mouth which left me breathless and a bit dizzy. “I've dreamed of this,” he told me.

“Me, too,” I said. “Fuck me, Jeff. Fuck my pussy. I need it sooo bad.”

I fumbled with his fly, needing his help to guide my nervous fingers, until his prodigious cock burst out. I stroked it frantically, feeling it lengthen and harden in my palm. I swear, the thing seemed even bigger still. But that didn't matter any more. Size wouldn't bring more pain. Just pleasure. With an ease which must have seemed like years of practice, I guided the head of his cock to the entrance of my wet emptiness and slid him inside, feeling the glorious stretch as my insides accommodated his size. Unable to curb the urge, he pushed and slid deeper inside me, filling me to bursting, making me moan like a bitch in heat as he slowly, divinely, brought his full balls to rest in the crack of my ass. I wrapped him with my legs hard enough to drive breath from him and gripped his back, the squared ends of my manicured nails digging into his skin enough to elicit a delightful throaty growl.

“You're there,” I breathed, moments from joyous tears. “You're really inside me.”

“I love you, so much,” he whispered, and he pulled himself back almost to the point of popping out of me, then slowly and firmly thrust himself back in. The feeling of fullness subsumed beneath a tidal wave of pure pleasure at the divine friction of his thrust, and I used my legs to drive him in harder, making his thighs slap against my buttocks.

“Like that,” I cooed, massaging the thick muscles in his back.

He said nothing, repeating *I love you* like a mantra with his eyes as his thrusts gathered speed and power, making me grunt and squeal, helpless beneath him. I drank his strength like a liquor, making myself thoroughly drunk, becoming the writhing, moaning animal from any porno movie. A strange feeling, like some reservoir deep inside me, began filling and swelling with a warm, thrilling promise. I stretched inside, something inside me struggling to contain it to no avail. Every thrust, every hesitation at the shallow and every erg of energy spent filling me to my depth, added more volume to the overflowing sensation inside me. I began to crave it, like a drowning woman craved air, reaching for it, grasping for it through my mewling cries and panting grunts.

Finally, the realization hit me of what I felt. I locked my emerald eyes onto his and half-growled, “Don't stop. Please don't fucking stop.”

He pounded into me harder, losing all pretense at tenderness, just sawing his cock into the soft flesh of me as fast as he could. The stretching, overflowing feeling inside me seemed to freeze for a moment, blanking my mind, and then... *burst*.

Electric waves of pure ecstasy flowed along every nerve in my body, from the roots of my hair to my toenails. My body clenched around his as I unknowingly sank my teeth into the hard muscle of his shoulder, then arched my back and screamed an ululating cry of abandon as Jeff pounded against me. A breathless eternity later, I sagged against him, almost too sensitive to continue, but the reservoir inside me began filling up once again, quicker than before. Unable to express my gratitude, my *devotion* to Jeff and his miraculous cock, I just pulled him down forcefully and locked him in a savage kiss.

I came three more times before I noticed the rising arpeggio of grunts accompanying Jeff's deep thrusts. I felt him pull away, trying to withdraw from me, and I locked my legs around him like a vise, using my hips to urge him deeper.

"I can't, baby," he panted, "I'm not wearing a condom."

"I don't care," I said. "I want it in me. Fill me up. Give me a baby, a hundred babies. I want every bit of you. Please."

Unable to contain himself, he grabbed my hips and thrust into me as deeply as he would go, the blunt head of his cock pushing against the hard nub of my cervix. I felt a flood of warmth fill me, coating my insides with heat and life. I stared at his face, memorizing every line and cast shadow of his ecstasy as he pumped jet after hot jet of his seed into my body. I imagined the tiny sperm, starting their swim upwards into my deepest body, seeking out the other half of themselves in the wet darkness of my womb. A part of me almost prayed – if I had it in me to do such things – that those sperm would find that completion, leaving a tiny cluster of cells to grow inside me and become the perfect melding of Jeff and me.

He slipped out of me with a wet pop and I felt his semen begin to flow backwards, down and out of me. I scooted quickly off the silk upholstery – somehow I imagined even the patient Cynthia might lose her composure at a cum stain on her antique sofa – and let him drip onto the varnished hardwood instead.

"That... that was..."

"It was everything I ever wanted," I told him. "I love you so much, Jeff."

* * * * *

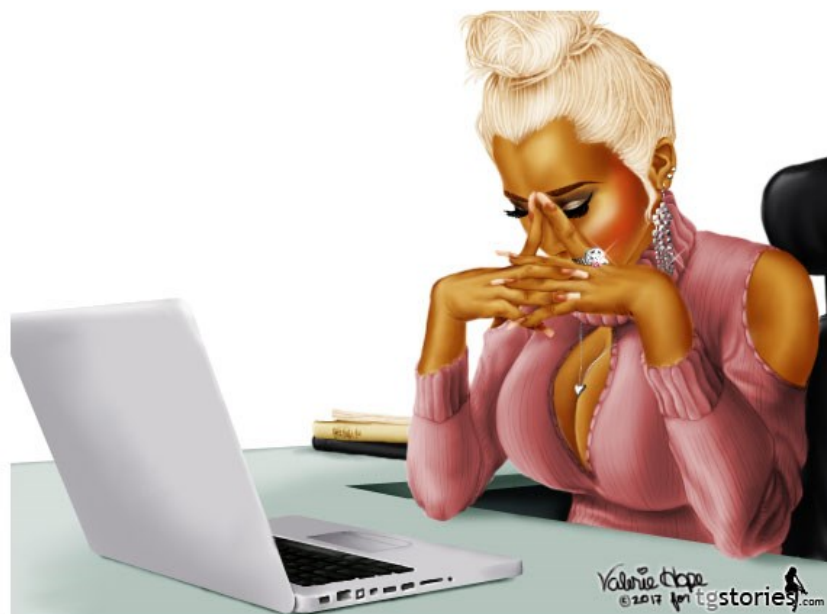
Nobody warned me, after my first vaginal sex with a new partner, that most women developed a urinary tract infection shortly afterwards while their bodies adjusted to the new flora invading them. I woke early the next day, ready to do my hair and makeup like always, but instead fought a nightmare of burning and itching when I peed. I panicked in my ignorance, thinking perhaps Jeff might have given me gonorrhea or chlamydia in his haste to fuck me, not even considering that he, too, came to last night a virgin the same as me. I sent Cynthia a text and explained my symptoms. She answered back with a call from her lab downstairs, telling me to head down when I was ready.

I found her hard at work – probably another all-nighter, but with not a hair out of place – over a fresh batch of data. I clearly saw full-body scans and extensive lab results on Jeff and myself, and my own file sitting next to her computer.

Cynthia soothed me and explained what happened – I suppose my screams last night alerted her to Jeff's and my nocturnal escapade – and gave me a bottle of antibiotics and some topical cream to alleviate the burning sensation. She seemed pleased at the sexualization of my relationship with Jeff, but as a mother couldn't in good conscience make any comment to that end. She cautioned me to drink more water and that my symptoms would clear up in a day or two.

I informed her of my lack of vitamins – I wanted to keep up the momentum of growing my hair, and I took the last of my supplements yesterday evening. She patted my hand and sprang up – surprisingly energetic for a woman who worked all night without sleep, but heaven only knew what kind of high-powered drugs she might have concocted to keep herself awake and alert for extended periods – before going to the storeroom to fetch me some more vitamins. I sat in her chair while I waited, glancing casually at the stacks of body scans, x-rays, CT scans and lab results of my body. Only when I looked at the screen of her laptop did a sentence in her latest report catch my eye.

Abnormal development of ovarian surface prohibits sufficient response to LSH. No ovulation detected and no follicle development visible. Fallopian tubes seem narrow, questionable for passage of an fertilized ovum if any ovum were to be successfully released. Possible stent placement necessary, perhaps some synthetic LSH to stimulate ova production? Schedule pelvic and pap smear, but for now Tiffany will remain irreversibly infertile. Must inform her gently, and soon, given her recent sexual activity.



She seemed pleased at the sexualization of my relationship with Jeff

In the blink of an eye, my joy and elation at last night's deflowering evaporated beneath a haze of frustration and misery. I felt hot tears gathering at the corners of my eyes just as Cynthia re-entered the room. She took one look at me and knew everything.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," she said softly.

"I probably should've expected it," I whimpered. "Everything about me is so complicated, something's always going wrong. But I *just* found the man of my dreams, and I just started thinking about babies. Mama, it's not *fair*."

She stroked my hair, pulling me against her breast. "I know it isn't, darling," she soothed. "And Mama will fix it. I promise. It won't be forever. I just need to think about it."

"You've done so much," I wailed. "I shouldn't have to depend on you for everything. Why can't I just be a normal girl?"

"Pish," she said. "You must never be a normal girl. You are an *extraordinary* girl. On top of being a medical miracle, you're the strongest human being I've ever known. We will find a way around this, don't you worry."

"Mama's gonna kiss it, make it better?" I asked plaintively.

"You bet she is, little girl," she said, soothing away my tears.

* * * * *

Jeff found me later, chain-smoking on the back porch staircase, fighting back frustrated tears. For once, he spared me the disapproving look at my cigarettes and just sat next to me, using the connection we forged between us last night to pick up on my mood.

"What is it, baby?" he asked softly.



"What is it, baby?" he asked softly.

"I, um... I saw, like, this report," I whined, leaning into the crook of his neck. "Of your mom's. It says I can't have babies."

"Never?" he asked.

"She said no, not 'never,' but for definite not right now," I said.

"Well, not never is a good thing, right?"

"When you came inside me, baby, I just... I just got this image of myself as a normal girl. Like Mackenzi. Getting pregnant, having babies... having *your* babies... and I just..."

"Shh," he told me. "It's all gonna happen, Princess. All of it, everything you want. We're gonna get married, and we're gonna have a life together, and Mom will get to the bottom of everything and she'll fix it so you can get pregnant. We're just gonna need to wait a little while."

I balled up a fist and *thumped* it against my knee. "I'm sick of waiting, Jeff."

"But why this huge rush?"

"Because I'm so fucking *close*, baby! It's right there – just out of my reach. I can almost smell it."

He pulled me tight. "It'll happen, Tiff. Just be patient a little bit longer, okay?"

I pushed myself away, even though I wanted to stay in his arms forever. "I guess I don't have a choice," I grumped. I stuffed my unlit cigarette back into my pack and dropped it into my purse. "I have to get to work. I love you."

"Love you, too."

* * * * *

I all but stumbled through the night shift – my peppy bimbo personality carried me through but I did find myself crying in the bathroom a couple of times – and couldn't have told anyone who I waited on or what I said if they'd paid me in gold. I did the usual – brought food and beer, snapped selfies, flirted and raked in my tips – but my heart just wasn't in it.

Finally – it seemed like forever – the last customer left and they closed the doors. I started rolling silverware, still in a daze, when Amanda the bartender came and sat across from me.

"You okay, baby doll?" she asked. "You seemed kinda out of it tonight."

I ventured a smile. "I guess," I said. "I just got some bad news today, that's all."

"Wanna talk about it?"

I patted her forearm. "You're so sweet," I told her. "But actually – rain check? I'm kinda raw, still, and I'm really sick of crying. If I try to talk about it, I'm totes gonna end up crying again."

"I get it," she said, giving me a sympathetic pout. "But listen – I really did want to thank you."

"Thank me for what?"

"For introducing me to Matt," she said. "He is so fucking sweet. I *really* like him."

"I'm so glad to hear that," I told her.

"Can you believe we're headed to Vegas for a conference next month? Two dates and I'm already heading off to Vegas with him."

"Wow," I said. "You really *do* like him."

"Yeah, and I trust him, too," she said. "Never really trusted a guy, before. It's kinda awesome."

Her phone beeped and she looked at the screen. "See?" she said, showing me her phone. "He's already texting me. Asking how my night went. Isn't that so sweet?"

"It's nice to see you happy, baby," I told her.

"Listen, feel better, 'kay?" she said, giving me a quick hug. "You're totally my girl. I can't have you

being all mopey 'n' stuff. I want you to be happy.”

“Thanks,” I said. About that time, the night manager – David – stepped to the table where we sat and dropped two fat wads of cash in front of us, our divvy of the night's tips.

“Pretty good night,” he said as I counted. I looked at Amanda from the corner of my eye, thinking about her and Matt and their trip...



“It's nice to see you happy, baby,” I told her.

“Hey, David, can you, um, do me a favor 'n' take me off the schedule next week?” I asked, suddenly back to my usual bubbly and perky self.

“The whole week?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I told him. “I have this crazy idea, I'm gonna need some time, 'kay?”

He looked around at the throng of girls in their orange shorts and tight tank tops and shrugged. “You know you're one of my best waitresses, Tiffany, I don't know if I can afford to go without you that long. You know we have a bunch of new girls coming in, and I want them to be able to see you work.”

“You're sweet,” I told him, pressing my boobs against his forearm in that way that got me great tips. “But it's really, like, important, 'kay? I promise I'll come back ready to work doubles to make it up to you.”

"I dunno..." he said, scratching his thick beard.

I gave him the widest eyes and the cutest pout I could muster. "Pretty please?"

He sighed. "Yeah, yeah, turn off the puppy-dog eyes. You win. I'll take you off the schedule. What's this big important thing you have to do, anyhow?"

I grinned, tucking my tip money into the strap of my bra. "Top secret, babe. Can't breathe a word."

I LOOKED OVER THE HUGE pile of luggage stacked in my room. I puffed a little – even in as good a shape as I was, lugging this mound of bags down to my car would be a pain. Still, I couldn't repress a smile. This is what girls did, right? Packed everything they owned for a trip?

Sneaking into Jeff's room to pack his things proved to be easier. From my time on the streets, I knew how to pack the essentials for a man. Razor, toothbrush, shaving cream, that sort of thing. At least I didn't need to throw condoms into the bag. We wouldn't need to worry about that for a while.

Seven trips up and down the stairs later – no need for cardio today! – I finally loaded the last of the luggage into my Jeep and leaned against the tailgate for a cigarette. The first three puffs dizzied me – Jeff's prohibition on smoking cut me back to one or two a day, and they started really packing a wallop, even switching to ultra-lights. I took time to stub out the butt on the side of the pavement and hide the evidence in the trashcans around the side of the house. I knew he could probably smell it on me, but I still didn't want him to catch me. A spanking from those powerful hands might actually cross the line from sexy and naughty into real punishment.

He got home around noon, pulling his Jetta beside my car in a crunch of gravel. I bounded into his arms and kissed him passionately as soon as the door shut, *booping* his nose fondly as I threaded my arm through his.

"I missed you," he said as we walked towards the house.

"We've only been apart for, like, an hour and a half," I giggled.

"I still missed you."

"Missed me, or missed my pussy?" I asked, thinking about last night's tender and oh-so-satisfying sex.

"Missed you, baby," he said. "How was your day?"

"Oh, y'know, the usual. Class, then the gym, then I had to run to the travel agent."

"Travel agent?" he asked.

I pulled my surprise out of my pocket and presented it to him proudly. "Ta-daaa! Surprise!"

He took the paper from my hand and examined it. “Two round-trip tickets to Las Vegas?” he asked.

“Yep,” I told him. “Our flight leaves in three hours. I already packed you a bag. You and I are getting married. Tonight.”

He held me at arm's length. “But I haven't even officially proposed. I had this big thing all worked out in my head, Tiff, there was gonna be this whole big production...”

I put a finger across his lips. “And you can still do every bit of it. But I told you – I'm sick of waiting. Maybe I can't have your babies right now. But I can be your fucking wife right now. I saved up my tip money and dammit, I'm not going to bed tonight until I'm your wife.”

He kissed me. “You're crazy,” he told me. “I love you.”

“Go eat,” I told him. “We have to, like, budget an hour to get through security.”

“What am I gonna tell Mom?”

I gave him a playful smack on the backside to hustle him along. “Figure something out while you make yourself a sandwich,” I told him. “We can, like, call her from the airport 'n' stuff. No way are you getting out of this. I went to a lot of fucking trouble, 'kay? Now get it in gear. I wanna be Mrs. Jeffrey Thorne by this time tomorrow.”

* * * * *

Jeff's initial consternation gave way to excitement by the time we checked our baggage and headed down to the terminal. I clung to his arm, grinning like a happy idiot, absolutely thrilled with my own inventiveness and my wifely ability to bludgeon him into doing what I wanted.



"What am I gonna tell Mom?"

We boarded the plane and cuddled close over the armrest, the very portrait of a happy young couple madly in love. We announced our elopement to the flight attendant and got complimentary champagne, we made a hokey decision to find an Elvis impersonator for the ceremony to make it the genuine Vegas experience, I showed him the official name change petition I downloaded from the county clerk website and happily filled it out on the tray table while he studied macroeconomics for his exams next week. In typical Thorne fashion, Jeff stood to earn his bachelor's degree in a scant three years – two of those spent in a hospital bed – and he already planned to progress on to his MBA as soon as the ink dried on his bachelor's degree. I marveled at the utter lack of jealousy I felt comparing his academic achievement to my own associate's degree in cosmetology with a C-minus average. I liked that he outshone me. I liked that he was smarter and more accomplished. It just reinforced my job in the relationship, to be pretty and obedient and to devote myself to his happiness.

We touched down in Vegas three hours later and hopped a taxi to our hotel, a lavishly tacky Vegas casino affair of bright lights and *faux* marble with gold trim and plaster columns full of zombie-like gamblers and long-legged cocktail waitresses. We checked into the honeymoon suite as Mr. and Mrs. Jeffrey Thorne, which gave me no end of happy thrills and tingles. I paused just long enough to hang my clothes, fix my hair and makeup and change my outfit while Jeff found the nearest wedding chapel. The place technically fell within walking distance, but my choice of platform heels made for slow going and Jeff called us an Uber before we'd made it two blocks. I didn't care – I would have crawled naked over broken glass if he asked me – because I focused solely on the destination.

True to his word, Jeff found us a tacky little Chapel of Love and booked us in for the Elvis experience. The guy was really good – he sounded and moved just like the King, in his garish costume covered with little battery-powered LED lights. He sang *Love Me Tender* to us both while we shanghai'd the couple in line behind us to be our witnesses. I bought some tacky flowers from the gift shop to hold and wear in my hair while Jeff secured us some Ring Pops from a vending machine for the exchange.

I faced him, looking up at his towering height, while the ersatz Elvis struck a pose and began with a guttural “uh, dearly beloved...”



He sang Love Me Tender to us both!

I had no doubt in my mind that people came into this place and barely listened to the vows all the time. But I took them deeply and permanently to heart as I solemnly repeated: “I, Tiffany Amber Reynolds, take you, Jeffrey Richard Thorne, to be my, like, lawful wedded husband; to have and to hold, from this day forward; for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, for, like, all the days of my life. I promise to love and cherish, to honor and obey...”

Elvis broke in. “Uh, sorry, little lady, but you know 'obey' isn't in these vows,” he interjected quietly.

I gave him a coquettish smile. “They are in *mine*, Elvis.”

His confusion registered only for a moment before he shrugged. “Whatever you say, little lady,” he said finally. “Carry on. Uh, thankuhvurrymuch.”

“Um... where was I?”

“To honor and obey...” Jeff whispered.

“Oh. Right!” I giggled. “To honor and obey, for as long as we both shall live.”

“So, uh... y'all got the rings?” Elvis prompted.

Jeff chuckled. “Which one do you want, babe? I have grape and cherry.”

“Better give me the grape,” I giggled, “because you already got my cherry.”

Elvis nearly choked. He put a hand on Jeff's shoulder. “You're a vurry lucky man, there, chief.”

“Don't I know it.”

“Repeat after me, then: with this ring, I thee wed...”

“With this, uh... Ring Pop, I thee wed...”

* * * * *

Jeff – my *husband* – and I gave most of the furniture in the hotel room a real workout that night. So, too, the bathtub and the mini-bar and the little alcove in the hallway next to the ice machine. I lost count of how many times he fucked me, in all my openings, sometimes tender, sometimes rough, sometimes a wonderful breathless mixture of the two. Every time I came – and I came a *lot* – I would clench myself around him and cry out “Mrs. Tiffany Thorne” or some derivative of my married name – my *married name!* – to drive myself to higher heights. When we ordered room service on one of our infrequent breaks – I preferred to dine on my husband's cum rather than ordinary food for the most part – and the attendant asked for a signature, I delighted in making the young man wait for a moment. All because I needed to ask my husband. To check with my husband. To get permission from my husband.

I awoke late in the morning, hours past my usual ungodly hour, to find a rose and a note next to the bed in Jeff's manly scrawl, telling me to order anything I wanted for breakfast, that he needed to take care of a little business before lunch. I didn't question – after all, my *husband* made all the arrangements – and chose to soak my sore and abused body in a hot bath full of fragrant bubbles for a scandalous hour, working out the kinks and soreness in preparation for another sex marathon again tonight.

I had only just begun toweling my hair dry when I heard the door open. Jeff stepped through and called for me in such a domestic way that my heart went a little soft around the edges, threatening to melt. “Honey, you here?”

“Um... in the bathroom, sweetie,” I answered, reveling in the June Cleaver-ness of it all.

“Can you come out here a minute, please?”

I wrapped my hair in a towel – not bothering to cover my nudity, since my perfect Barbie-doll body was my *husband's* property to look at as he pleased – and walked into the main room. Jeff had his back to me, pouring two glasses of champagne.

“Where did you go, babe?” I asked.

“To the casino, actually,” he told me, back still turned. “Y'know, it's actually pretty easy if you plan it out. Put a certain dollar amount per table, don't leave until you hit your number, leave the minute you win what you came for. If you approach it scientifically, you can really clean up. It's all about self-control.”

“You, like, gambled?” I asked, pouting a little. “You should've called me. I wanted to go, too.”

“We can go later,” he told me. “I needed to earn a little money.”

“Like, for what?” I asked.

He turned and flipped open a small velvet box, revealing a Tacori ring encrusted with several thousand dollars' worth of diamonds. “For this.”

He sank gracefully to one knee. “Tiffany, will you marry me? Again?”

Tears streamed down my cheeks. “Yes,” I said. “I'll marry you every day, baby.”

He popped back up to his feet and slid the scandalously expensive ring on my finger. “Good, that's settled,” he said briskly, reaching back into his pocket. “And, since we ate mine and I'm pretty sure yours spent some time in your butt last night, we should probably go ahead and say, with *this* ring, I thee wed.”

He slid the matching diamond-encrusted wedding band on, nestling under the huge diamond on the engagement ring perfectly. He passed me a simple platinum band, which I slipped onto his finger, then rose to my highest tiptoe to press my naked body against him, crushing an impassioned kiss into his lips. “They're beautiful, Jeff,” I said tearfully. “Just beautiful. I can't believe this worked. I'm actually your wife.” I looked meaningfully at the signed, legally binding marriage certificate on the bedside table.

He handed me a glass of champagne. I never thought of that as foreplay, but one thing led to another quite quickly. I finally levered myself out of bed, his cum dripping down my thighs, and went into the bathroom to put my face on and do something with my hair while Jeff ordered himself some lunch.

“So, uh... my mom has texted me probably a dozen times,” he said when I emerged from the bathroom, looking Barbie-perfect once again in a form-fitting pink shirt, a denim mini and my hair in a tight pony off the very top of my head.

I nodded. “We should, like, *totally* call her, babe,” I said, threading my earlobes with big hoop

earrings.

“Think she's gonna be mad?”

“I can't even, like, imagine what that looks like,” I said. “But whatever, y'know? I'll be right beside you, the whole time. She loves you, baby. She'll get over it.”

He walked across the disheveled hotel room, stepping over discarded panties and bras and socks and an empty bottle of champagne, to fish his laptop from its case and hook it up to the little charging station at the hotel's desk. He logged into the wifi using the password we got at check-in and brought up Skype. I took a spot next to him as the call rang through.

Cynthia appeared in the window, looking perfectly put together as always, but with little worry lines around her eyes. It was the first time I could remember seeing her as anything less than perfectly serene. “Jeff! Tiffany! Where on earth have you been?”

“We're okay, Mom,” Jeff said. “We're in Las Vegas.”

Her eyes widened. “Las Vegas? What in heaven's name are you doing there?”

I giggled. “Oh, y'know, the usual. Played some blackjack, y'know, took in a show, got married, maybe we're gonna find an all-you-can-eat buffet later.”

Cynthia's eyes narrowed. “Go back one.”



“Las Vegas? What in heaven's name are you doing there?”

We held up our hands to display the new rings. Cynthia gasped audibly.

“You didn't! You did?” she said, excitement tinging her voice.

“It's, like, official,” I said. “I don't have to pretend any more, Mama – I really *am* your daughter now.”

“Oh, I'm so... actually, what am I? Happy? Angry? Why didn't you tell me? Why didn't you call?”

“We wanted to, Mom, honest,” Jeff said. “But we thought this should just be us. I promise, we can have the big outdoor wedding with all the guests. Tiffany said she didn't want to wait, and it turned out I didn't either. So we just did it.”

“You kids,” Cynthia said, dabbing her eyes with a tissue. “I so wanted to see it.”

“And you will,” Jeff promised.

“You would have, like, laughed the whole time,” I told her. “We got married by an Elvis impersonator 'n' stuff. It was so tacky and romantic and ridiculous.”

“It really was,” Jeff affirmed.

“I love you both so much,” she said. “I could just strangle the pair of you for running off and doing it behind my back, but I understand. When are you coming home?”

“We were gonna go see Blue Man Group tonight and leave early tomorrow,” Jeff said. “I have to meet my study group on Tuesday for finals.”

“You certainly do,” Cynthia said. “And you have a very important meeting on Wednesday, did you forget?”

“How could I?” he said, apprehension apparent in his voice.

“You'll be fine, darling, I promise. It's just a formality at this point,” she said.

“Um... what are y'all talking about?” I interjected.

Cynthia smiled, knowingly and with a bit of an evil leer. “Aha,” she said smugly. “Perhaps I should go. It seems you have a few things to discuss with your *wife*, Jeff.”

He cleared his throat, the very picture of sheepishness. “You're right. I'll call you tomorrow, okay, before we leave. I love you, Mom.”

“I love you, too, sweetheart,” she said. “Welcome to the family, Tiffany. I love you.”

“I love you, Mama. Bye! See you tomorrow!”

I ended the connection with a keystroke and I felt Jeff's strong hands begin to massage my shoulders, and felt his breath against my neck as he began to nuzzle my ear. I capitulated to the blissful sensation for a moment before I controlled myself, turning quickly and grabbing his wrists.

"Nice try, there, buster. But you can't distract me with, like, mind-blowing sex. Well, you totally *can*, but not right now, 'kay?" I said mock-sternly. "Wanna tell me what that was about?"

He rubbed the back of his neck, blushing a little. "I was gonna tell you."

"Sure you were."

He narrowed his eyes. "I *was*," he protested. "I got a little sidetracked. See, this crazy blonde with huge tits plopped two tickets to Vegas in my hand and said she wasn't gonna sleep again until I married her."

I giggled. "She sounds like a total psycho," I said.

"You have no idea," he teased.

"Okay, so you're off the hook 'n' stuff," I conceded, releasing his wrists. "So, you were gonna tell me something yesterday and I bulldozed you. What were you gonna tell me?"

"So, uh... remember when I got sick the last time, and Mom asked you for all that research on companies?" he said. "She bought some. Three, to be exact. And we just formed the umbrella company to oversee all the others, and... well, turns out on Wednesday I'm supposed to go to this gala thing, where they're gonna name me CEO."

"What – so, like, I'm an executive's wife?" I said, astounded.

"Gonna be," he said. "I have to recruit somebody – Dr. Evan Carter, this turbo-genius guy who's gonna be there. Mom and the chief executives of the three companies all want him to be the Chief Technology Officer and more or less run things. At the gala. I'm supposed to talk him into coming to work for us. For me. Coming to work for *me*."

"Wow!" I said. "That is so cool!"

"Really? Because I'm terrified."

"Don't be, baby," I told him. "This guy's, like, totally in the bag."

"How do you figure?"

"You thought you were, like, going in there to recruit this Carter guy," I said. "What you *didn't* know was that you were going in there to recruit this Carter guy with your brand-new *wife* hanging on your arm 'n' stuff."

He grinned. "You're right," he said. "That does change a few things."

"This is awesome, baby! You're gonna be so good at this!"

"I really hope so," he said. "And, uh... well, there's more."

"What do you mean, babe?"

"The company – *my* company, I mean – got started with proceeds from some of Mom's patents. Patents for some of the procedures that made me, and some from the procedures that made you. Patents that she sold to the companies she bought to sweeten the deal, make them sign."

"Wow, she sold her patents?"

"Well, there's a royalty clause. The companies get most of the money, of course, but there's a little kickback to the patent holder," he explained. "It's pretty standard, actually. Except that Mom put those particular patents in my name. So those kickbacks, they actually come to me."

"How sweet! Your mom totally hooked you up!" I cooed.

"Yeah, sweet is one word," he said. "Uh, Tiff? I don't think you follow. I'm talking about patents for some of the most cutting-edge medical technology in the world right now. Science fiction shit. That kind of thing, it doesn't go cheap. And those companies she bought – they're hustling. Just like they're supposed to do. So, those 'little' kickbacks? Some of them aren't so little."

"So, um... like, what are you telling me?" I said, falling into happy bimbo confusion.

He blushed scarlet and mumbled his last to the carpet between his feet. "So, when you married me, you know you got half of everything I own, right?"

I blew a raspberry. "Whatevs," I said. "Like I care about that."

"Well, care or not, it's true. So, Tiff, that means the second you signed that marriage certificate, you stepped into a net worth of six hundred and twenty-four million dollars."

I choked. "I'm worth *how* much?"

"Six hundred twenty-four million," he repeated. "That's if we ever divorce."

"Fuck that," I told him fiercely. "You're never getting rid of me."

"In that case, the two of us are worth one-point-two billion dollars. With a *b*, hon."

"Billionaires. Fucking seriously, *billionaires*?"

"No bullshit."

I turned on my toe and marched towards the door, slinging my purse over one shoulder.

“Wait – where are you going, babe?”

“Back to the boutique in the lobby,” I said, opening the door. “I’m going to get those fucking Louboutins you said I couldn’t have last night. Cheapskate. I married a fucking billionaire cheapskate.”

* * * * *

We arrived back home to an impromptu “engagement party” in Cynthia’s kitchen. Corks popped merrily as Mackenzi hugged me tight and berated me for not bringing her along to be my maid of honor and provide some semblance of a bachelorette party. She brought Richard – a tall, kind-eyed man with dark hair and a quiet charm – and introduced him around. Amanda and Matt came, arm in arm and looking happy to be with one another, as well as a few of Jeff’s friends from business school and some of my cosmetology buddies and a smattering of assorted Hooters Girls.

Jeff suffered the gathering with good grace, much more interested in dragging me upstairs and ripping off my clothes, since I’d spent the whole flight, giving him little hand-ies under the tray table and flashing him my tits and pussy when people weren’t looking.

The party wound down around nightfall – Amanda, Matt, Mackenzi and Richard all coupled off and Cynthia hearing the siren song of her laboratory. I followed my husband upstairs, leaving the bags for the morning, and entered my room. Which stood completely empty of any of my personal belongings, just sterile furniture like the first day I arrived.

I walked back out into the hallway, to see Jeff staring at his own room in puzzlement.

“She didn’t,” I breathed, taking Jeff’s hand and leading him down to the end of the hallway, to the master suite. Sure enough, Cynthia moved all her belongings out and ours in, giving me the enormous walk-in closet and the vast dressing table for my makeup, clothes, shoes and jewelry.

“This doesn’t feel right at all,” Jeff said.

“She wanted to, obviously, babe,” I told him. “Mama doesn’t do anything by accident. I bet she, like, figured ‘I never fucking sleep here, and it’s bitchy to make newlyweds sleep in separate bedrooms.’ That’s so totally like her.”

Only one thing of Cynthia’s remained in the room – a picture in a silver frame next to the bed. A dusky-skinned woman with long, curly sable hair and a warm smile gazed out lovingly from the frame, hugging her denim-clad knees in a beautiful candid portrait.

“Who’s that?” I asked.

“My other mom,” he said. “Her name’s Amanda, like your friend. She left us, after I got sick. It

broke Mom's heart. I barely even remember her, but I don't think Mom ever stopped loving her. I think she lives in Oregon, now.”

“Your mom wanted you to have this,” I said, running my fingers across the portrait. “Family. All this stuff I've been doing. Calling her Mama, bitching about babies, then running off an getting married... We've got her thinking about family.”

“Yeah,” he said. “And now, you and me... we're a family.”

“I know,” I said. “I love that.”

“Poor mom,” he said. “I forget how lonely it must be, down in that lab.”

“Don't you get it, babe? She's done. She fixed you. You're strong as a bull. Healthy. She's got nothing left to fix. Maybe she'll work on me, next, maybe she'll just quit. But she accomplished her mission, y'know? Now she's thinking about what's next.”

“Family,” Jeff said. “Y'know, you're pretty wise for a bimbo.”

I twirled my hair. “Um... whatever.”

* * * * *

Unfortunately, no amount of spontaneous blowjobs or Xanax could take the edge off of Jeff's nerves as the day of the gala drew closer. I triggered full-on wife mode, taking care of *all* the minor details for him, arranging the fitting for his tux, hiring the limousine, confirming the invitation and the RSVP and even writing out some talking points for his conversation with Dr. Carter. But still, I caught him each night pacing the floor after I thought I'd fucked him to sleep, mumbling to himself and pulling at his hair.

By the time I got him into his tuxedo – and almost out of it right after that, apparently I had a thing for guys in tuxedos – and myself into my pink sequined sheath dress, arranged my hair and perfected my makeup, Jeff fast approached 'nervous wreck' status. He fretted over the tiniest details, certain that his choice of cufflinks would be enough to turn Carter away and make the board revoke their offer of CEO. I tried to keep him laughing as best I could, finally giving in to chemical solutions and pouring him a generous tumbler of 12-year-old Scotch and watching him down every last drop.

The limo dropped us off at the extravagant hotel an hour later, and something unforeseen happened – one look at the glamorous, perfectly styled women walking into the gala and I caught an acute case of Ugly Duckling Syndrome. My own nerve completely fled, and I ducked behind a topiary, hyperventilating and fishing in my Gucci clutch for a cigarette.

“I can't go in there,” I said. “I'm a fraud. Everybody's gonna know, Jeff. They're gonna see you married to a homeless veteran who used to be a guy and it's gonna ruin everything.”

“No, they won't,” he said calmly, stepping into the role of protector effortlessly and putting his

own anxiety aside just to comfort me. I would've kicked myself, wishing I'd thought of this tactic sooner to calm him down, if my panic wasn't completely genuine and I desperately needed to breathe into a paper bag.

“Look at those women, Jeff! I don't measure up to them.”

He took my hands in his and forced eye contact. “Bullshit,” he said flatly. “They don't measure up to you. You're not a fraud. You're a goddamned Marine. You survived years on the streets, all by yourself. You're a medical miracle, the bravest and most selfless scientific guinea pig-slash-test pilot in the world. You taught yourself to be a woman in months. These women, they're not even in your league, Tiffany. They don't even deserve to be in the same room as you.”

I gulped down air and steadied myself. “Sorry, babe,” I said. “This isn't about me. I'm here to support you, not the other way 'round.”

I satisfied myself with one long puff from my cigarette and tossed it out, then threaded my arm through his. “Let's get in there. You 'n' me have work to do.”

We walked down the red carpet and into the ballroom, having only a moment before the board of directors descended on us, shaking Jeff's hand and trying to ingratiate themselves with the new boss. Older gentlemen, with older wives who stared at me disapprovingly while their husbands shot clandestine looks down my cleavage. I know what I looked like to them. Already, before I even got my first drink, they looked down on me. Underestimated me.

Which is just what I needed.

Louis Donnelly, the former Chairman of the Board, nattered on in Jeff's ear about diversifying the company's portfolio and starting aggressive investments in *blah blah blah*, talking business way before it was time. Seeing my opportunity, I took Donnelly's arm – making sure to press my firm breasts against his forearm in the process – and gave him my most glittering smile.

“I'm sure you're right, Louis – can I call you Louis? – but I, like, know for a fact that my Jeff thinks that the company should, y'know, put a lot more of its resources into charity 'n' stuff. Y'know, like, in the spirit of what Cynthia wants. She wants these breakthroughs of hers to benefit the world, y'know, not just the company's bottom line 'n' stuff. Don't you agree?”

“Well, yes, of course, but – doesn't it stand to reason that a more profitable company can do more good works?” he stammered, staring at my breasts unabashedly, the old lecher.

I giggled and twirled my hair. “Oh, I'm a complete dummy when it comes to that kind of thing,” I said. “But Jeff isn't. He, like, explained it to me once but it went way over my head. But I remember him saying something about, like, funneling grants back into the company from non-profits to help reduce the cost of these treatments 'n' stuff, so they'd be, like, affordable to ordinary people?”

“He.. what? Wait. Now, that's very interesting, young lady. Very interesting.”

I excused myself smoothly and grabbed a glass of wine from a passing waitress while Donnelly and two other board members started finance-babbling about the ramifications of what I so casually dropped into conversation. The ballroom buzzed with mingled conversations and canned music, and began to exude a stifling heat after a few minutes. I looked around, searching for Jeff, but he actually appeared to be in his element, having a highly technical discussion with a knot of young financiers. I blew him a kiss and signaled my intention to step onto the terrace for a breath of air.

I found a secluded spot behind a decorative planter and fished a cigarette from my purse, then began to rummage for my matches. I jumped a little as a warm contralto voice spoke beside me from deeper in shadow, the familiar smell of smoke preceding her.

“Oh, thank God. Somebody else who actually smokes,” the woman said, stepping into the light. A glamorous and perfectly style Latina, wearing a blue dress that hugged gym-sculpted and surgeon-enhanced curves that made my mouth water a little bit.

“Oh, here, honey,” she said, clicking a silver filigreed lighter to life. I leaned in, puffing my cigarette alight gratefully.

“Thanks so much,” I said, offering a hand. “I’m Tiffany.”

“Maria,” the woman replied. “You look beautiful. I love your shoes!”

I blushed demurely. “You’re so sweet. Where did you find that dress? It’s gorgeous on you.”

One cigarette gave way to a second as we chatted, striking up a casual friendship with very little effort. We talked about traveling – neither of us was very worldly, and talked mostly of places we wanted to visit as opposed to places we’d been. I mentioned my service in the Corps and she talked about being a nurse in Mexico City.

“I normally hate these things,” Maria was saying, gesturing to the party. “But this one is important.”

“Important how?”

“Some *jefe*, a bigwig,” she said. “He’s supposed to offer my husband a job tonight.”

“Really? What kind of job?”

“A really good one,” Maria said. “Lots of power, lots of money. And believe me, *mí esposa* deserves a job like that. But he’s such a good person. He doesn’t want to, how does he say, ‘sell out?’ He thinks maybe if he takes this job, he won’t be able to help people any more. I love him for that, but we really need a job like this. My mother left us with so much debt when she passed away.”

I wrinkled my nose. “You’re married to Evan Carter,” I said.

“Sí! You know him?”

“No, but I'm gonna,” I said, taking her hands in mine. “Go get him, Maria, and meet me inside.”

“But why?”

“Because my husband is the bigwig,” I told her. “And your husband is gonna love him.”



“You're so sweet. Where did you find that dress? It's gorgeous on you.”

It only took a few moments to pry Jeff away from some stuffy-looking suits – executives from one of the companies Cynthia bought – and drag him through the crowd to the catering table to the highly-visible blue dress. I pulled him close, clinging to him lovingly and to comfort his jangled nerves.

“Maria, sweetie, this is my husband I was telling you about,” I said after kissing her cheeks and pulling back close to Jeff. “Jeff, this is Maria Carter. And her husband? Dr. Evan Carter?”

The rakishly slender man in the ill-fitting tuxedo next to Maria extended his hand.

“Jeff, honey, I met Maria outside and I started telling her about all the charity work you want to do,” I said. “Y'know, that plan you tried to explain to me about using the grants to bring down the cost of your treatments, put them all within reach of lower income people 'n' stuff?”

“It sounds very interesting,” Dr. Carter said. “I'll admit, it doesn't sound fiscally responsible at all. I've heard a few of the money men around here tonight hemming and hawing about it.”

“They can hem and haw all they like,” Jeff said. “In the end, they either fall in line with it or I show them the door. They're hard-wired, unfortunately. Profit profit profit, that's all they know. I believe that our procedures – and all the ones we will develop as a result – are meant to help mankind, and no matter what we do they will *always* turn a profit. I think we should concentrate on access, making these breakthroughs available to the maximum amount of people. I don't want to fast-track FDA testing because I want these things to the market, I want FDA approval because I want them deployed. In the field, with the Red Cross and Doctors Without Borders.”

Dr. Carter openly goggled, stymied momentarily by the passion in Jeff's voice. I traded a secret, nose-wrinkling grin with Maria as Carter said, “have you done any research into portability? Some of these procedures require armies' worth of support. I want to streamline that, I want to see them on ambulances in the inner cities.”

I broke away, leaving the men to discuss the future, and took Maria's arm.

“That was fun,” I told her.

“It really was,” Maria agreed. “So, what it is you do, Tiffany?”

I blushed. “You're gonna laugh,” I said. “I'm a waitress and a hairdresser.”

She laughed, but not at me. “Don't be embarrassed, honey,” she said. “I was picking up golf balls at the driving range when I met my Evan.”

“I guess, now that I'm an executive's wife, I should probably find something more appropriate 'n' stuff.”

“You kidding? None of them have jobs. They just go to yoga classes and fuck their personal trainers and fly around the world just so they can complain about all the places they go,” she said, not bothering to hide her distaste.

I looked back at Evan and Jeff, changing the world in their minds. “Y'know what they *do* have, though, is shitloads of money and free time,” I said. “Hey, Maria – what do you know about starting a foundation?”

* * * * *

Maria set a great table, the smells from the food almost enough to tempt even *me* to eat. I sat at the head of the table, looking around at the likes of Emily Bledsoe and Karen Lincoln. Maria's and my three-week spy operation to infiltrate the yoga classes and spa days of these young executive's wives paid off, forging acquaintances strong enough to make an invitation to breakfast not seem contrived or creepy. I loved just being among them – the trophy wives, and here I sat with Maria in a bid to become their Queen Bee. As the youngest, and arguably *hottest* of them, and the highest-status husband, I stood to progress to the social pinnacle quickly.

“I'm so glad you guys could come,” I told them all, sipping coffee and laughing at the jokes and

gossip around the table – catty comments about so-and-so's new young secretary would probably become wife number three before the year was out, who was having what work done, who sneaked away to Ibiza with who's husband.

“Welcome,” Maria added.

“And even though we do consider you friends, you probably guessed that Maria and I have an ulterior motive,” I told them. “Word on the streets is you guys are the best fundraisers and organizers in the whole organization, and we could so use your help. See, we just finished the paperwork on the Thorne Foundation, and we need to energize it.”



“I'm so glad you guys could come,”

“What's your foundation about?” Emily Bledsoe, the little plastic fuck-doll wife of Jonathan Bledsoe, Jeff's CFO, asked.

“A subject near to my heart,” I said, all the 'bimbo' dropping from my voice. “Our mission is to end homelessness. Worldwide. I think, with the right approach, we can actually pull it off. A combination of mental health workers on the streets, low-income housing, drug treatment and jobs programs, as well as upgrading existing shelters... It's a twenty-year plan, but it's a plan. So how about it? Does that sound like something you girls might want to help us out with?”

“You need a big hook,” Chelsea Hamm said from the opposite end of the table. “Really splash, get your name out there. Like a concert. I could make some calls, y'know, if you wanted, maybe see if Gwen Stefani or somebody might perform?”

I smiled. Sure, Jeff would probably spank me for not talking like the bimbo he wanted. But if I could recruit these rich women to my cause, it would be worth the sore behind.

The End

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