



SUMMARY: Looking for cheap rent, a young guy ends up at the home of a couple who have recently lost their daughter, little does he know they have plans for him to replace her.

NESSUN MAGGIOR DOLORE

Part One

by Valerie Hope

"Nessun maggior dolore che ricordarsi del tempo felice ne la miseria."

There is no greater sorrow than to remember a time of happiness in misery.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Inferno 05.120 - 121

I WASN'T REALLY SURE WHEN it was, exactly, that my life took the turn for the worst. It had started off promising enough, to be sure - good parents who actually stayed together throughout my entire childhood, summer jobs and decent grades in high school. I did my four-year rip at the state university and managed a business degree and got a decent job once I was out of school. A one-one in a clean, new apartment complex and a paycheck that, while not huge, kept me in pizza, beer and strippers and let me zero out my credit card every month.

Not the sort of story one expects to turn hard-luck. But there it was; once the tech bubble burst and all the stock options that I'd been banking on for my financial "start" weren't worth the paper they were printed on, and then 9/11 made it almost impossible to get a job since no one was hiring for shit. I did my time, working some dead-enders and trying to keep my bills paid, but the boat was filling faster than I could bail water. By the time that the job market actually began to recover, I was ass-deep in debt without much in the way of prospects, my car repossessed and my credit card maxed along with its three new brothers and sisters. Plus, I'd managed to have a lovely bout with meningitis about a year back and, with no health coverage, was now being hammered by the medical bills on top of everything else, and my credit was wrecked and I had no equity in anything to borrow against. I almost wished that the doctors had just let me die; but somehow the bastards would have managed to charge me for *that*, too.

So that was how Jason Wicks, one step ahead of his creditors, wound up on the plant-adorned front porch of the Cunninghams, all my worldly possessions in a milk crate at my feet and in a military-surplus duffel bag over my shoulder, holding the classified ads under one arm and hoping against hope these people weren't going to run a credit check on me before they agreed to rent me the room they'd advertised. I really needed a break on rent so that the 7.50 an hour I was making as a night clerk at the Seven-Eleven would stretch a little farther than it was now. Maybe if I could get the room and live on the very cheap for a year, I could manage to start leveraging myself a little bit out of the debt I was in. Bit by bit, the credit counselor had told me. One little bit at a time.

I rang the bell nervously, wiping the sweat on my palm against the leg of my faded jeans. These older couples who rented rooms could be very particular about who they let in the house. I put on my best, most open "good first impression smile" as I heard a small dog begin yipping madly.

"Just a minute, just a minute," a kindly voice called from inside. "Muffin, stop it!"

Muffin, whom I assumed was the dog, didn't quiet or settle at all. The door opened and a crinkle-faced man in his late forties with gold-rimmed glasses and a somewhat distracted smile opened the door. He pushed his glasses up his nose a bit and ran a hand through his limp, greying hair and looked at me quizzically.

"Hi, I'm Jason. Jason Wicks," I submitted. "I spoke to your wife on the phone. I'm here about the room you're renting." I showed him the classified ad in a feeble attempt to not look desperate. Like a twentysomething with everything he owns in a milk crate and a duffel bag could ever look anything *other* than desperate.

"Oh? Of course, of course," he said, shaking my offered hand. "I'm David Cunningham. Madelyn is just inside. Come in, come in. Maddie? The young man is here about the room. Come in, young man, come in."

"Guarda com'entri e di cui tu ti fide; non t'inganni l'ampiezza de l'intrare!"

Look how thou enterest, and in whom thou trustest; let not the portal's amplitude deceive thee!

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Inferno 05.019 - 021

He gestured me in quickly and closed the door behind me as I was beset by the leaping, yipping ball of brown fur that was Muffin, the house's erstwhile protector. I managed the mauling with good graces as David chivvied me through the wood-floored foyer and into a cozy but very *kitschy* den.

"Have a seat," David bade me. "Maddie? Didja hear me? Maddie?" he hollered.

"Yeah, yeah, keep your shirt on," a woman's voice called.

I sat on the couch and tried to look nonchalant. David busied himself at a desk near the window and didn't pay me much attention. That made me even more uncomfortable, but it wasn't that I was beneath the man's notice or anything. He was just that distracted. After an awkward eternity that only lasted about three minutes, a tall and gaudy woman entered the room holding a tray with a pitcher of iced tea and several glasses. She looked for all the world like a spruced-up Peg Bundy. Big everything - big hair, big jewelry. Her makeup was gaudy but well done and she looked well maintained. She even had the overdone, sexy sashay. She took my hand warmly between her two, the long fire-engine red nails chafing my wrists gently.

"You must be Jason," she said in a purr. "I'm Maddie Cunningham. We spoke on the phone."

"Hi," I said. "Nice to finally meet you."

"Same here," she said. "Have a seat. Want some tea?"

I nodded and she busied herself pouring. She took a glass to David and set it at his elbow, making a fuss over him by straightening his hair and collar and kissing him wetly on the

forehead. David acknowledged it all with a distracted grunt, never looking up from his computer.

"Don't mind him," Maddie said, making a two-handed wave-off gesture as she minced on her high heels back to the couch and poured me a glass. "He's always working."

"What does he do?" I asked.

"He's a geneticist," she said. "Buncha stuff I don't really understand, but he makes really good money. Keeps me in Prada, so I don't ask many questions, isn't that right, dear?"

Another inarticulate grunt.

"What is it you do, Jason?" she asked, folding her hands atop one knee.

"I'm trying to get back into the white collar workforce," I told her honestly, figuring she would appreciate the no-bullshit approach more than anything slick. She was attractive, in a trashy kind of way, and I felt sure guys had run smooth-assed lies on her for the majority of her life. Women like her tended to be able to smell bullshit a mile off.

"Get back in?" she asked.

"Yeah," I said. "I got laid off right after 9/11 and you remember how hard things were. I'm trying to find a way back in. Right now I'm a night manager at Seven-Eleven. Not exactly what I want to be doing, but it at least gets me a paycheck while I'm looking for something better. Plus, it leaves my days free to job-hunt."

She eyed me coolly. "Do you drink or do drugs?" she asked.

"No ma'am," I said.

"Oh," she said. Her grin was a little infectious. "D'you mind if we do, then?"

I chuckled. "It's a free country."

She blew a raspberry. "Don't get me started. I'm a flower child, honey, raised by hippies. The last thing you want to get me started on is whether or not this is a free country."

"Listen to her," David grunted from his workspace, without looking up.

"Can it, you," she warned her husband good-naturedly. "Listen, we don't really much care about what you do in your free time, we just don't have the room or the inclination for any kind of parties or get-togethers here."

"I'd need more friends," I said honestly. "Besides, I go out to have fun."

"Sounds good," she said. "You'd have your own bathroom and bedroom and you'd be welcome to use the kitchen and watch TV in the family room whenever you like. David and I usually hit the sack around eleven or so, so keep the volume down."

"I'm usually working until 7 a.m.," I explained. "If I'm not working, I'm sleeping these days. I'm a pretty dull person, really."

"That's no good," she said, leaning forward to pat my forearm. "Maybe one of my friends has a daughter or a niece about your age. I'll ask around for you."

"Thanks, but no," I said. "Don't have the time right now for that. Maybe later, when I'm back on my feet again. Besides, I need every penny I make right now. Girlfriends have a tendency to bite into savings."

David snorted and Maddie gave him a black look.

"Any questions?" she asked me.

"Laundry?" I said.

"Washer and dryer are downstairs next to your room. You're welcome to them, since you're chipping in for water. Only rule is if you take it out of the dryer you fold it. Hope you don't mind folding other people's underwear."

"Beats going to the laundromat," I said. "I can swallow a little pride."

"David? Anything you want to ask Jason, here?" Maddie said.

He looked at me over the top of his glasses. "Any medical problems? Allergies, taking any meds?"

That one took me a moment. What did that have to do with anything? "I'm allergic to penicillin, sir," I said after a long, confused pause. "And I have an inhaler for my asthma."

"Atrovent or albuterol?" David asked.

"Albuterol, I think," I said. "I don't need it very often. I can check if you like."

"No need, no need," David said, and went back to his work. Was it my imagination or was he writing that information down? I looked to Maddie for confirmation.

"Never mind him," she stage-whispered. "He's got a real hang-up about that kind of thing. 'What if he passes out suddenly, what do we do?' that kind of thing."

I relaxed a little. I guess that made sense, in an odd sort of way. At least it was believable.

"Well, hell, Jason, I like you," Maddie announced at length, patting my knee. "You're responsible for your own meals but we'll probably invite you to eat with us a lot - we're just like that. No loud music, no parties, and if you're willing to help out around the house we're willing to knock fifty bucks off the rent a month. How's that sound?"

I grinned. "When can I move in?"

"Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate."

Abandon every hope, all ye who enter in.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Inferno 03.009

The basement room was a little musty, but clean. It was surprisingly open and airy for an underground accommodation, with little arched windows at the ground level on the east and west exposures of the house letting in day-long sunlight. The laundry room was in a little alcove just to the right of the cramped little bathroom, and David had cobbled up a well-built little partition for the bedroom, with an old but serviceable double mattress, a chest of drawers, a battered wardrobe and a rickety ladderback chair next to a small bookshelf. It was

about ten times as much storage as I needed for my meager possessions, which I threw on the bed and flopped down beside.

Maddie was right behind me with an armful of towels, sheets and blankets. She put them carefully on the chair and regarded me with a smile.

"You want the five-cent tour?" she asked merrily.

"Sure," I said, vaulting clumsily back to my feet. "I already saw the laundry and the bathroom."

She led me upstairs in her usual brisk mincing stride, her leopard-print stretch pants tracing figure-eights in the air before my eyes on the staircase. I realized, somewhat ashamedly, over the course of the climb that Maddie had a very nice ass.

She took me around the downstairs, showing me the kitchen and the garage and the family room. There was a very oppressive looking shelf full of David's books, all about genetics and chemistry and biomedicine, the titles as incomprehensible as the subject matter. I shrugged and moved on to Maddie's smile - she was obviously as bewildered by her husband's vocation as I was.

Upstairs was David and Maddie's room, a hall closet, a bathroom and a sewing room and a door which was shut - the only shut door in the house, I realized - at the end of the hall.

"What's in there?" I asked.

Maddie's everpresent smile slipped a little. "That was our daughter's room."

"Was?" I asked.

Maddie looked at the floor. "She was our angel. She... died two summers ago. Car accident. It wasn't anybody's fault, it just happened. We keep the door shut and keep her room just like it was, we don't ever go in. It's... I guess it's just nice to know it's there, or something like that. David or I neither one can bring ourselves to go in there and change anything."

She sniffled loudly. "Is that crazy, or what?" she asked me.

"Not at all," I said solemnly. "I'm really sorry for your loss."

"You're sweet," Maddie told me. "We don't talk about it very much. It's still very painful. I know it's like ignoring an elephant in the living room, but if you wouldn't mind not mentioning it?"

"Of course," I said. "Not another word."

"We really appreciate it," she said with a trembling smile, close to tears from just this short re-telling of the story. That was more than enough to convince me that I should steer well clear of the subject in the future.

"Listen, that's all there is to the place," Maddie said, brightening up visibly after a deep breath. "Why don't you go get settled in and then let me make us some lunch?"

"Sounds great," I told her. "Can I help you with anything?"

She looked at me strangely, but with great compassion. "What a sweet person you are. No, I can manage. You just get your stuff put away, I'll call you when it's ready."

She seemed reluctant to let go of my hand, which she'd taken unconsciously when telling me about her daughter. I pulled away slowly, not wanting to seem insensitive but needing to be away from her pain.

I tried not to rush downstairs. The bright, happy house seemed a little dimmer somehow, and just a little bit creepy. I needed the room, and the cheap rent, badly. But I might have reconsidered if I'd known that I would be sharing the house with a ghost.

"La gloria di colui che tutto move per l'universo penetra, e risplende in una parte più e meno altrove."

The glory of Him who moveth everything doth penetrate the universe and shine in one part more and in another less.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Paradiso 01.001 - 003

Routine was the buzzword in the Cunningham house. It was only a matter of weeks before I'd settled into a comfortable satellite routine to their larger one. Maddie and David were up at six thirty every morning except Sunday (their morning to sleep in until eight), which meant I had about half an hour to spend with them most days when I got in off of my night shift and have some breakfast (Maddie was an exceptional cook) before I slept. Sundays I helped out in the back garden and mowed the grass for my rent discount and usually caught up on my job hunt from the week on my one and only relic from my days of past solvency - a laptop computer that was obsolete and slow but completely mine, my only link with the Internet and the last vestige of the time when I had a steady paycheck that covered more than just my bills and debt.

Maddie puttered around a lot, working on her house and occasionally going to the salon she co-owned with some friends to see clients. She was the beautician's beautician, able to do hair and nails and waxing and facials all as well as any specialist. She kept abreast of all the latest industry trends and bragged about how one day she would start a cosmetics empire with some of her side projects and be able to retire and live on Easy Street for the rest of her days.

David didn't talk much, but he worked steadily. He'd converted a garret over their garage into a makeshift lab and when he wasn't up there, he was at his desk in the day room clicking away on his computer or making meticulous notes in a black leather-bound notebook. He was friendly enough, if quirky, but just didn't speak until he had something important or meaningful to say. It came across as a little standoffish until one got to know him, but he was far and away one of the most interesting and literate people I'd ever met and I truly began to look forward to the infrequent times when he opened up and talked to me about any of a myriad of subjects, from philosophy to politics to world trade. It usually started over an article in the paper, so I made it a point to be there when he read it over coffee in the mornings, on the off chance that it would spark a conversation.

Not that the house was quiet, by any stretch. Maddie filled in the gaps with a constant barrage of gay, light banter. She talked to David for hours on end without ever receiving a single word in reply, or much more than a chuckle or a noncommittal grunt. It didn't seem to faze her in the slightest, she kept on as if he'd contributed something brilliant to the conversation and rattled right along.

I marvelled at the strength and openness of their relationship. This was more than a marriage (my only points of comparison were my own parents' marriage, which was a shambles that

ended in divorce when I was thirteen) and more than a friendship. It was an *understanding*, in the deepest sense of the word. Even without kisses and hugs and lingering touches, in fact without any really demonstrative affection at all, the love and tenderness and attachment between these two wonderful people was palpable in that house, and there was no doubt in my mind that this man and this woman were meant to be together and were connected together by something unseen and much, much stronger than anything the storybooks would have us believe.

They had begun, I realized without even knowing how or when it happened, to treat me like family. It was something I'd missed in my former life, and the feeling of belonging and acceptance were a balm to a very troubled heart. I began to - miracle of miracles - relax for the first time in years. Suddenly the overwhelming debt and the depth and breadth of the run of bad luck I'd suffered just didn't seem to be that bad any more. Not when there was coffee in the mornings with Maddie and David, rare gems of conversations over the newspaper with David or the quick-as-lightning back-and-forth repartée with Maddie over household chores or meals in the kitchen.

I couldn't help looking forward to the times when I could leave work and spend time with them. I kept myself very cognizant that I could never replace their slain daughter, and was very careful not to ever try. Maddie was good to her word - she and David didn't speak of it and the sealed room upstairs might as well have not existed for all they mentioned it. But I could tell that it was in the air between them, and by extension me, like some kind of dark smear on an otherwise perfectly clear photograph. I found myself wishing there were something I could do, but I knew full well that such a thing wasn't possible. There was no healing from the death of a child, I knew that much just from having lived in the world outside this house. Just respecting their wishes and keeping far away from the memory of their daughter was all I could do, and I sensed somehow that doing that was enough for my new friends.

"Tu non dimandi che spiriti son questi che tu vedi? Or vo' che sappi, innanzi che più andi, ch'ei non peccaro..."

Thou dost not ask what spirits these, which thou beholdest, are? Now will I have thee know, ere thou go farther, that they sinned not...

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Inferno 04.031 - 034

I opened the door, tired and cotton-headed after my shift, to the frenzied barking and mauling of Muffin, the fearless Peke who guarded the door to the Cunningham house and, despite my best efforts to ingratiate myself with the diminutive Cerberus, still hated me with a blazing passion. We'd reached a mutual understanding that we would just steer clear of one another, except for the daily ritual of coming through the front door.

Once, I'd had the bright idea to come in through the garage and trick the dog. The Peke was there, growling and snapping and barking, waiting for me. It wasn't just anyone who came through the door. It was personal. Muffin didn't hate strangers, she hated *me*.

I waded obliviously through the leaping, snapping frenzy - how nervous does one have to be when being assaulted by a Pekingese? - and walked into the day room, looking forward to another lighthearted conversation with Maddie or, perhaps if the stars were in their proper alignment, a deep and thought-provoking conversation with David.

So it was with no small amount of surprise that I walked in on a very somber Maddie, sitting on the sofa in the day room, surrounded by used wads of Kleenex and open photo albums, a wistful and pained look on her garishly made-up face. Brownish streaks of mascara lined her cheeks and she dabbed at her nose with another in a long line of Kleenex.

I ducked my head and tried to make my way through the front to the basement stairs without drawing her notice, to leave her alone with her reflections, but she stopped me with a trembling voice.

"No, sweetie, please don't go," she said. "Come sit down."

I all but tiptoed to the little chair beside the sofa. She patted the cushion by way of invitation and squeezed my hand gratefully.

"Today was her birthday," she said simply.

"I'm so sorry," I whispered.

She patted me briskly. "You're such a sweet boy," she said. "You remind me of my Josephine, did you know that? You have the same kind hearts and there's the same kind of light in her eyes."

I could sense, somehow, that Maddie needed to talk. I took a chance.

"What was she like?" I asked quietly.

Maddie laughed, one of those half-forced laughs that exists to move pain from one place to another inside one's soul.

"Oh, she was a handful," Maddie said, shaking her head so that her brassy red curls bobbed against her smeared cheeks. "That girl, she definitely had a mind of her own, let me tell you. When she was six, she told me one day, 'Momma, I'm not going to eat carrots any more.' I said, 'Honey, they're good for you.' Josie put her little fists on her hips and told me, bold as brass, 'I don't care, they taste yucky. Even if they are good for me I'm not going to die if I don't eat them.' Six years old! Can you believe it?"

I laughed. "She sounds like a real hellraiser."

Maddie laughed, this time honestly. "You don't know the half of it, honey. She took after me. David tried and tried and tried to get her to focus on school, but she didn't want any of it. She was a B student who could have been valedictorian if she'd spent, oh, twenty minutes a day on her schoolwork. She just didn't care - it wasn't as important to her as dance or cheerleading or parties or going out."

"I knew girls like that when I was in school," I said, pointedly not mentioning that I'd had a deep and burning desire to fuck those girls every chance I got.

"Oh, I think we all did," Maddie went on, wiping her eyes. "And Josie was their queen. She was the most popular girl and went to all the big events. The party didn't start until Josie hit the door. David was beside himself, but I lived in a house where mothers punished daughters for behavior like that with words like 'slut' and 'whore.' When I got pregnant I swore my daughter would never hear those words from my lips. I had some real screaming matches with David over it, too."

"David? Screaming? I just can't picture it," I said.

She laughed. "Oh, he can manage it, believe you me. But I wasn't going to have Josie growing up feeling guilty about who she was and how she acted from me. Home was going to be where you were loved regardless of what you did. It was hard, though - her drinking and smoking and, I think, some drugs. Boyfriend after boyfriend after boyfriend. But we didn't punish her for it. David was a prince. He always sat her down and made sure she had *all* the facts before she acted. 'I can't stop you doing what you want,' he'd tell her, 'but I can make sure you have all the information so you can make an informed decision.'"

"I wish I'd had parents like you," I said, honestly.

She patted my hand. "She was such a beautiful girl," she said, passing me a picture of a fresh-faced teenage girl, blonde hair and makeup done perfectly. The smile was open and more than a little bit sultry.

"She really was," I told her. "She looks like you."

Maddie waved me off with a long-nailed hand. "Bullshit, but thanks."

"No, seriously," I said. "The eyes and the nose are David's, but that smile and those cheekbones are 100% Maddie."

"You're sweet," Maddie said. "Oh, I miss her."

"I can't begin to imagine," I said, and this time it was me who took her hand. "Forgive me for saying this, Maddie, but I hope I never find out if I'm as tough as you and David."

She sniffled through a warm smile. "I hope you never do either, Jason."

She began to close the albums and put the pictures away, her hands trembling a little at the action of closing the book on her lost daughter.

"Why don't I make us some coffee?" I said, more to give Maddie the chance to be alone than need for anything to drink.

"That sounds wonderful," she said wetly, fighting tears. "Thanks for sitting with me, Jason, really. I'm sure you had better things to do than to sit with a crazy old woman."

"Not a damn thing," I said. "It sounds like you needed to talk. I'm good for that."

"You certainly are," she said, looking at me cryptically. I didn't think much of it.

"I'll go drop my stuff downstairs, and get on that coffee," I said, patting her hand. "Won't be a second."

She gave me a brave but tremulous smile as I took the basement stairs two at the time. I was strangely elated that she'd opened up to me, even though I did share her sadness over the loss of her little girl. Again, I found myself wishing there were something I could do. I almost bowled over David at the foot of the stairs, coming out of the little bathroom.

"Oh! Sorry, Jason, I didn't see you there," he said, his eyes wide.

"No problem," I said, steadying him with a hand on his shoulder. "You okay?"

"Fine, fine," he said, pushing up his glasses. It was then I noticed what was in his hand.

"What are you doing with my hairbrush?" I asked, not with hostility but with genuine curiosity. Whatever it was, I was sure it would be something interesting.

David looked at the object in his hand with some shock, as if just now realizing he held it. If it was an act, David Cunningham played the "Absent-Minded Professor" to a T.

"Oh," he said. "This is yours?"

"Yeah," I said, half-smiling.

"Oh. Oh, goodness," he said. "It looks just like mine."

"Wouldn't yours be up in your bathroom?" I offered.

"I suppose it would," David said. He handed me the brush. "Here. I'm very sorry. I cleaned all the old hair out of it for you."

"Don't worry about it," I said, confused. "No big deal."

David patted me on the shoulder and went by me, muttering something unintelligible to himself as he made his way up the stairs. I shook my head. It was far from the weirdest thing I'd ever seen David do, and no one would purposefully make up an excuse that lame if he were actually up to something down here. It wasn't like David had any nefarious plot against me, after all - it was *David* for Chrissakes, I didn't think the man had a single malicious thought in his entire life. Maybe he was looking for drugs or something, or just had a wild hair and decided to catalog the brand of aftershave and toothpaste I used as proof of some weird theory he'd had in the middle of the night.

I put the hairbrush back on the sink where I'd left it, and didn't think another thing about it as I dropped my bag on the bed and rocketed back up the stairs to attend to Maddie's coffee.

"Or discendiamo omai a maggior pieta..."

Let us descend now unto greater woe...

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Inferno 07.098

The next few weeks were a little tense, which seemed odd to me because of the connection I'd made with Maddie. David was up in his attic workshop nearly round the clock and when he did see me, he never made eye contact and pushed past me as quickly as he could. Maddie's conversations seemed to have a wistful quality to them, and they centered around the circumstances of my life, my childhood and my schooling. It was almost as if she were saying good-bye to me somehow, and I began to worry that maybe I had overstayed my welcome. The thought of being pushed out the door and out into the world again dismayed me more than I expected. I began to feel afraid, and worked even harder to ingratiate myself. I got no more results with Maddie than I had with Muffin. There was some sort of wall there now, and I didn't know how or why it had come into being. A part of me began to feel as if it were in mourning. I didn't know what I'd done to alienate my friends, but I wished to God I could go back in time and take it back.

"What the fuck is wrong with you, man?"

I snapped out of my reverie and looked around. The flickering fluorescents made the garish colors of the cigarettes and lottery tickets and junk food packages even more bright and vitriolic. I looked at Eric, the night cashier, who was playing the stand-up Tekken game in the corner, his limp mop of dark hair hanging over his acned face.

"What?" I said.

"Dude, where the fuck are you tonight? I asked you if you wanted to go hang out tomorrow night," he repeated with the put-upon infinite patience of the teenager with the entire adult species.

"Huh? Oh. No, man, I can't."

"You never can, man. What the hell? We're always asking you if you want to come hang out and you never say yes. What the fuck do you go home to every night?"

"Tomorrow night is my only night off this week," I said. "I have shit to do."

"What shit?" Eric demanded.

"Job shit," I said. "I don't want to be working here the rest of my life."

"Yeah, me neither, but you don't see me burning my days off looking for work."

"You live with your parents and don't pay rent," I said a little more harshly than I intended. "You don't have credit card bills and hospital bills and utilities. Go live on your own for a little while and come back and talk to me."

"Shit, man, if I could I would," he said. "Once I'm eighteen, dude, I'm so out of my parent's house. I'll have my own place and won't have to put up with their shit any more."

"Enjoy it while it lasts, Eric," I told him. "Because right now their 'shit' is the only thing protecting you from the world's 'shit.' And believe me, *dude*, your parents are fucking pussycats compared to what the world is going to do to you."

"Who pissed in your Prozac, dude?" Eric said, chastised.

"Look, man, I've had enough of listening to young punk teenagers like you bitching about how rough they have it. You don't know dick about how shitty the world is. You think you have it all figured out and that you're going to be able to go out and grab the world by the balls and squeeze until you get everything you want. You don't know shit, okay? Just accept it. You don't know shit."

"I know enough to fucking enjoy a day off when I get it," he protested.

"And I know enough to know there's no such thing as a fucking day off," I shot back. "Listen, kid, you don't know how good you have it. You're out in the world by yourself for six months and I guarantee you you'll be wishing for the days when mommy and daddy paid your bills and all you had to do in exchange was obey a curfew and not put your feet on the coffee table."

"Fuck you, man," Eric spat.

"Yeah, fuck me," I said, laughing.

"Like you weren't just like me when you were seventeen, dude."

"I was exactly like you," I told him. "Right down to the acne. Difference is, I got my teeth kicked in by the world. Look at me, Eric! Fucking look at me! I have a bachelor's degree in business from State and I'm managing a Seven-Eleven! I did my honors thesis on entrepreneurial strategy and third-world business expansion and I spent an hour tonight mopping up a 2-liter bottle of Big Red that some stoned teenager dropped. You think this is how I imagined it?"

"I don't know how the fuck you imagined anything," Eric said, obviously hostile at being on the losing end of the argument, and maybe even more hostile because I was destroying his carefully constructed view of the world as it revolved around him.

"I thought so," I said, calming. "Look, there's two hours left before we go home. Let's just not talk until then, okay?"

"Sounds good to me, asshole," he said sullenly.

"Me, too, shithead."

The two hours crawled by and I honestly thought for a moment that the earth had stopped in its orbit and dawn would never begin to pink the eastern horizon. I filled out my timecard and avoided Eric's sullen glances, walking through the deepening autumn chill towards the bus stop. The ride home was a haze of thought and regret - why did I go off on that stupid kid? Where was the harm in letting him live in his illusions? Had the world made me *that* bitter, that I couldn't even allow a child to live in his dreamworld?

I watched the gray, colorless streets go by outside the window and gradually be replaced with the manicured green and brown of the suburban lawns. A part of me found strange comfort there, and began to wish that the bus would just keep on going forever, and I could remain in this numb, half-asleep state until I died from starvation.

But my legs automatically rose when I got to the Piedmont Street stop and I navigated the gauntlet of elbows and shopping bags in the aisle of the bus before dismounting and coughing my way through the diesel cloud of the revving bus as it pulled away. The crisp air filled my nose with a sting as I walked the two blocks to David and Maddie's house - not *my* house, not any more - and my tiny little joyless room in the basement.

"«Taci e lascia muover li anni»; sì ch'io non posso dir se non che pianto giusto verrà di retro ai vostri danni."

"Be still and let the years roll round;" So I can only say, that lamentation legitimate shall follow on your wrongs.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Paradiso 09.004-006

The house was strangely silent, something I was very unaccustomed to in the Cunningham household. Not even Muffin was on hand to greet me with his overblown ferocity and the little fierce nips on my fingers as I ignored him to pass through to the kitchen. I looked at the splay of letters on the floor beneath the mail slot and gathered them up out of habit, leafing through them quickly to pick out my credit card statements and my hospital bills, marked this time without the bright red 'Past Due' I'd grown so used to seeing there. Curious, I borrowed a letter opener from David's desk and slit them open.

Discover Card. Balance of zero dollars and zero cents. I closed my eyes and cleared my head, then took another, more careful look. Zero dollars and zero cents. The balance had been well over four thousand dollars as of my last statement. I looked at Citicard. Zero dollars and zero cents. I'd owed nearly six grand on that card. And the bill from City Medical Associates, well in excess of thirteen thousand dollars, now zero dollars and zero cents. It couldn't be right. My debt was gone.

Fumblingly, I picked up the phone and called the 800 number for Discover Cards. After a frenzied sending of 'hurry up' energy to the unheeding automated call center and the frantic pressing of buttons before the agonizingly calm female voice on the line prompted me, I got that my balance was still zero dollars and zero cents. I hit the operator button and waited as the voice informed me that my call might be recorded for quality assurance purposed before finally being awarded the singular honor of being allowed to speak to Debbie, who could arguably be the only human being working at the Discover Card call center.

"Hi, this is Jason Wicks," I said.

"Account number?" she asked, and I gave it to her even though I'd keyed it in through the telephone no less than four times. I waited while she brought up my information.

"I have a question about my balance," I said.

"You have no balance, sir," she explained patiently, like I was some learning-deficient kindergartener.

"When was the last payment made?" I asked.

"Four days ago, in the amount of \$4,453.11. Is there anything --"

I hung up on Debbie and dropped the cordless phone on the sofa.

"David?" I called. "Maddie?"

Maddie's cheerful voice answered from upstairs. "Up here, sweetie," she answered.

I charged up the stairs, looking in the bedroom and the sun room, sticking my head in every open door. "Where are you, Maddie?"

"End of the hall, sweetheart," she said.

End of the hall? Josie's room? I approached more carefully, knocking on the door.

"Come in, sweetie," Maddie answered.

I opened the door on squeaky hinges and stepped into the darkened room, the only light from the curtained window which shed a pale fitful light on a bookshelf and a teddy bear.

"What are you doing in here?" I asked.

"Welcome home, honey," Maddie said.

I felt a strong arm around my neck and a sharp stinging jab of a needle in my jugular. A cold burning sensation spread up behind my jaw and down my arm and the floor began to sway and heave like the deck of a ship. Strong but gentle arms lowered me to the floor.

"Everything's going to be okay, sweetheart," David's soft voice said. "Momma and Daddy are going to make everything better now."

I tried to speak, but blackness claimed me for its own.

Ω



SUMMARY: Looking for cheap rent, a young guy ends up at the home of a couple who have recently lost their daughter, little does he know they have plans for him to replace her.

NESSUN MAGGIOR DOLORE

Part Two

by Valerie Hope

"Chi è costui che senza morte va per lo regno de la morta gente?"

Who is this that without death goes through the kingdom of the people dead?

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Inferno 08.084 - 085

"Jason? Wake up, honey. Wake up."

The voice filtered down through a moving, caustic display of lights, like looking up at the sunshine from the bottom of a swimming pool. The hazy, shifting pattern of lights and darks slowly coalesced into the concerned, heavily made-up face of Maddie Cunningham.

"What happened?" I whispered through a very raw throat.

"You passed out," Maddie explained. "We were worried sick."

"Passed out? Last thing I remember was... Josie's room."

"Josie's room? Don't be silly. We never go in there, sweetie."

"And my bills. They were all paid up."

"Well, of course they were. You work very hard and have been very frugal. I'm proud of you, sweetie, for paying all that money back. Most people your age don't even come close to getting out of debt as well as you have."

"I paid it back?" I asked.

"You sure did," David's voice said, the first upbeat tone I'd ever heard from him. I felt a squeezing pressure on my right bicep and looked down to see that David was taking my blood pressure. I was laying in a hospital-style bed and had an IV in my arm.

"Where am I?"

"David's workshop," Maddie said. "You're lucky. David is a doctor, you know."

She gestured to the wall and I was barely able to pick out an M.D. diploma from Johns Hopkins among the dozens of other degrees, some honorary but most earned, which hung in neat rows on the wall.

"What's wrong with me, David?"

"I'm not sure," he said, writing down my blood pressure on a chart and tearing the cuff from my arm with a rip of velcro. "You're a little hypertensive. Were you aware of that?"

"High blood pressure? No. But it's no surprise. It runs in my family."

"That might be it, then," David said. "Sometimes, under stress, your pressure can shoot up all of a sudden and you have a syncopal episode like yours. I suggest that you take it easy for a little while. I've called in a prescription for you at the drugstore. It's Valium. I want you to take it for a little while, just for anxiety."

"But I'm not anxious," I protested.

"Maybe, maybe not," David said. "But I want you to take it anyway, for a while, at least. I want to rule this out."

"I could have sworn we were in your daughter's room," I said, turning to Maddie.

"It must have been a dream, sweetie," Maddie said. "Nobody was in there."

"I guess so," I said, closing my eyes. "My head hurts."

"Again, the high blood pressure," David said. "Listen, Jason, I'm going to get you some medication for that, as well. We should start trying to get it under control, whether it's what's behind your fainting spell or not. That stuff will kill you if you don't get it under control."

"Right," I said, already logy and about to fall asleep.

"I've left you some magazines and books," Maddie said. "They're mine, so I hope you don't mind *Cosmo* and Harlequin romances too much. They're all I have. I'll get you some others tomorrow. David wants you to stay in bed for a few days."

"But I have to work," I complained weakly.

"I'll call your boss," David said. "I am your doctor, after all."

"Oh. Okay," I said muzzily. I was already drifting back into the comfortable darkness.

I dimly felt Maddie pat my forearm, as if from another world.

"Quanti si tegnon or là sù gran regi che qui staranno come porci in brago."

How many are esteemed great kings up there, who here shall be like unto swine in mire.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Inferno 08.048-049

Somehow, I doubted, I wasn't getting any better. What had started out as a mild headache had grown into a screaming migraine which David gave me morphine for. The morphine helped with the pain, sure, but it started the nausea and the vomiting and the wracking cramps and diarrhea. My fever was very high - it spiked up to 107° once, I dimly remembered. I hallucinated often, and was never sure if what I remembered was what I remembered. I couldn't hold down food and was going through several liters of IV lactated Ringer's solution a day because I was in a constant trembling sweat. I lay very still, too weak to even toss and turn, in what seemed a constant puddle of my own filth.

It was during one of the timeless stretches where I wasn't quite asleep and wasn't quite awake that I heard the voices. It took a moment, through my feverish brain, to recognize them as Maddie and David's voices, although I couldn't see them in the half-darkness.

"I'm just not sure any more, David," Maddie was saying. "He's such a kind boy."

"Boy? He's no boy. And I don't care how kind he is. We *agreed*, Madelyn. It's too late to go back now. We could kill him if we stop now."

"But it just doesn't seem as right as it did at first."

"It's never easy to see someone suffer," David said. "But think about what the benefits will be."

"Are you sure it's going to work?" Maddie asked with a hint of desperation.

"Of course it will work," David said by way of dismissal. "I've checked and rechecked."

"But that's all figures in a computer. On paper. This is a living human being."

"Are you saying you don't want our daughter back?" David asked venomously.

Maddie's voice betrayed unshed tears. "You know that's not true."

"Then stay with me. Oh, Maddie, it's going to be perfect, I promise you. You just have to tough it out for a little bit longer. And then we'll be a family again."

"Promise?" Maddie said in a small, little-girl voice.

"I promise."

"He's awake," Maddie said.

I felt hands fiddling with the IV line in my arm and a rush of cold up the vein in my arm. I slid backwards into the dream again, without never really having known I was awake. I stirred again, knowing now that I could differentiate between being awake and being asleep - the waking world is the one where I hurt. Maddie was beside me on the bed, gently sponging the film of sweat and salt accumulated on my mottled skin.

"Maddie?" My voice sounded strange to my own ears.

"Hello, dear," she said, humming tunelessly to herself.

"How long have I been out?" I croaked.

"Three days, sweetie," Maddie said, as if she were saying 'five minutes,' as if it were the most commonplace thing in the world.

"Am I going to die?" I asked.

She chuckled. "Don't be so melodramatic, dear, of course you're not going to die. David's been monitoring you 'round the clock. You're going to be just fine."

"I feel like shit," I said.

"Language," she cautioned me. "David says you're through the worst of it. You should start feeling better very, very soon. As a matter of fact, he says you might be able to manage solid food if you wanted to try."

My stomach rebelled at the thought, but the sense of extreme hunger in my mind overruled it. I nodded.

"I'll make spaghetti, it's your favorite," Maddie said.

Spaghetti is my favorite? I wondered. *New one on me. I've never really liked it that much. My favorite is shrimp scampi. Wonder what gave her that idea?*

"Maybe even some ice cream for dessert, if you can manage. How does that sound?"

"Sounds great," I told her. "I might need some help, though. I'm weak as a kitten."

She smiled. "And you actually thought I'd let you attempt it without company?"

I managed a weak, slack-jawed grin. "I guess I didn't."

"Good. Now get some sleep, darling. I'll go start dinner."

She stood and caressed my cheek fondly. "Here, David made you these. They should help you pass the time since you're going to be bedridden for a while."

She slid a set of thick, heavy goggles over my eyes. They weighed a ton, and kept me in complete blackness. Total silence followed as she stuffed some kind of buds into my ears. I tried to call out to her, but I couldn't even hear my own voice.

Images erupted around me from the darkness, startling me. They were all around me, in three dimensions. I was in a featureless white room with white furnishings. Somewhere, all around me, a soft and subtle driving electronic music began to play.

A woman appeared, a beautiful woman with lustrous brown hair in an artfully windblown style, a china-doll face and long neck, an almost emaciated body with small nubs of breasts and long, showgirl legs. She was dressed in a simple white bodystocking and stood unblinking right in front of me.

I felt a coldness up the vein in my arm again, but I didn't care, transfixed as I was by the image of the woman in front of me.

A soothing woman's voice - Maddie's voice, I noticed, but different somehow, deeper and more sonorous, like there were some new and hidden vibrations buried in the timbre of her mellow alto - sprang into being from the air around me.

"The basis of fashion is fabric, cut and color," the voice said. "We'll begin with the cornerstone of any good wardrobe, the 'little black dress.'"

The woman in front of me didn't move, but was suddenly wearing a short, flirtatious black dress with spaghetti straps. She turned in a slow circle in front of me, and I saw not the sumptuous sexual creature in front of me nearly as much as I saw the wonderful way the dress draped on her figure. For some reason, I found myself utterly transfixed.

"This dress, designed by Vera Wang, is perfectly suited for a taller, more slender figure. Notice how the lines stay close to the..."

"L'altre potenze tutte quante mute; memoria, intelligenza e volontade in atto molto più che prima agute."

The other faculties are voiceless all; The memory, the intelligence, and the will in action far more vigorous than before.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Purgatorio 25.082-084

"Hey! You're up!" Maddie's cheerful voice piped from the doorway. It had taken me the better part of an hour to get my weakened legs over the bedside and then to rearrange the IV lines so that I wouldn't become tangled in them. I'd stood, with every intention of going to the bathroom on my own, but now that I had my feet underneath me I wasn't so sure that the catheter wasn't the better option. The floor was like water underneath me and I fought for balance and to keep my stomach settled.

"Up, yeah," I grunted. "But that's about all I can manage."

She quick-stepped to my side and helped me sit back down. "Don't try to do too much, too soon, sweetheart," she cautioned me. "You've been through a lot."

"Does David know what happened yet?" I asked, a little breathless from my exertion.

"He's run a million tests. He's fairly sure you have some kind of virus."

"Amazing how a little bitty cootie that I can't even see can knock me out like this," I said. "I feel like I'm a hundred years old."

Maddie waved me off dismissively, chuckling. "Bull. You'll be running marathons in no time. David says that you're going to be a little depressed for a while - he's always going on about how nobody pays any attention to the spiritual and emotional aspects of illness - but you'll be back to your fighting weight soon, I promise."

"I feel different," I said.

"Different how?"

"I don't know. Different. Weird, somehow, inside. Like stuff is moving around or something. And my skin feels different, too. I swear, Maddie, crazy as this sounds, it's like this isn't even my body any more."

"Sweetie, you've been in a bed for nearly a week. You haven't moved. Maybe you're just not used to it. That will change once you're up and around."

"I hope so," I muttered. "I hate feeling like this."

She patted my knee briskly. "You know what? I have an old treadmill up in the attic someplace. I could bring it in here and you could walk. I bet that would help, even if it was only a couple of steps right at first."

I sighed. "Right now it feels like I don't have the energy to even collapse," I told her honestly. "But logically that *has* to be a good idea. What does David think?"

"He'll think it's a great idea."

"How do you know?"

"Cause I'm going to *tell* him it's a great idea."

"Se tu ti rechi a mente lo Genesì dal principio, conviene prender sua vita e avanzar la gente...."

If thou bringest to thy mind Genesis at the beginning, it behoves Mankind to gain their life and to advance....

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Inferno 11.106 - 108

In typical Maddie fashion, though, it wasn't just a good idea. It was a great idea. And it wasn't just a treadmill. It was a treadmill plus hand weights and flexibility exercises with elastic bands for resistance and yoga and pilates and a bunch of exercises that David made up himself that did God knows what.

Every morning, David came into the room and shot me full of something - he said it was Vitamin B¹² but it felt more like twenty pots of coffee and a really good mood in a syringe, and then he hooked me up to the Unit.

The Unit was an invention of David's that looked like an overlarge iPod with about seventy wires coming off of it. He hung it on a velcro belt that went around my waist and then hooked up the wires via sticky electrodes to places all over my body - major muscle groups and the like. Then he set me about my exercises for the morning and the Unit fed impulses to my muscles, re-training them in the subtle art of movement forgotten over my illness. It seemed strange to me that I could forget how to walk and move properly over the course of just the week and a half I was bedridden, but David assured me that it only took a few days in some cases and if the damage wasn't addressed immediately it would last a lifetime. Not big on the idea of walking with a permanent hunch or limp, I didn't ask too many questions. The few questions I did dare to ask were usually overanswered and tended to involved charts and graphs and lengthy discourses about the cerebellum. After a few sessions like this I just stopped asking and did what I was told. We were all happier that way, it seemed.

And, I had to admit, the Unit did wonders. Where I could barely move before and it took all my energy just to stand up and walk a few steps, the Unit plus whatever David was injecting into me now had me able to do a light jog on the treadmill for about five minutes and do long stretches of calisthenics and cardio without passing out. It seemed like I gained back a little more endurance every day, like I could almost notice the difference in my strength from hour to hour. David's contraption might have been the cause, but I liked to believe that it was myself that was doing all the tough work.

Recuperation was a long, boring affair for me. Sure, I had Maddie's leftover Harlequin romances and *Cosmopolitan* and *Elle* magazines but I'd been through them a hundred times already. There was the exercise in the morning, and then mealtimes with David and Maddie which I lived for, but other than that and the weird VR movies at night which I could never seem to completely remember and always put me right to sleep, my day was extremely boring.

Skincare began to be a real problem. I got up and around a great deal, but the exertion took a toll on me and it forced me into long periods of sleep during the day. Random itches came up and David voiced some concerns about bedsores. I'd seen the nasty, gangrenous ulcers that could develop on the body with long periods of inactivity and the thought sickened me.

Maddie brought in a sack full of lotions and powders to combat the problem, all special concoctions that David had whipped up in his handy-dandy laboratory. We began by a long, arduous process with a portable laser that removed all the hair from my body. David said that ingrown hairs were where these things usually started, so removal of those hairs was a logical first step. It seemed to make sense to me - honestly, I didn't think about it too much. I was to

the point where if David said it made sense, I didn't really pursue the idea much further than that. He was two miles smarter than the most brilliant person I'd ever met before and he thought on a level that I just couldn't match.

The hairlessness was weird at first but I got used to it quickly, and honestly, I started to like it. The soft sheets were softer somehow and it felt really nice when my skin rubbed against itself. The lotion that Maddie was having me apply three times daily made it even nicer, since it made my skin impossibly soft and gave it a rosy, healthy glow that it had never had before.

"We need to get you some sun, next," Maddie told me as she helped me rub it on my back. I'd been marveling that the lotion was even reducing the freckles I'd had on my chest and legs since I was a little kid. My skin was starting to even out and the blemishes were fading. For some reason I couldn't quite put a finger on, it made me really happy.

"Sun? I better not, Maddie. I burn real easy," I told her.

"David can fix that," she said with a smile. "Don't ask me how, but he did it for me, and look at the results." She showed off her rich, mocha tan that set off her white teeth and sparkling eyes so well.

"You'd look amazing with a little tan," she continued, rubbing the cool lotion into my shoulders and making me a little woozy with how good it felt. "You should consider it."

"Maybe when I'm better I'll get one of those spray tans I saw in your magazine," I said.

"Ooo!" Maddie exclaimed, clapping her hands. "That would be so much fun! We should book an appointment and do it together!"

I laughed. Maddie was definitely infectious when it came to enthusiasm. I'd said it to put her off, but now I found myself looking forward to it a little.

"When I'm better," I told her again, gently and smiling.

She began to brush her fingers through my lengthening hair. "When you're better."

I luxuriated in the feeling for a little bit, but then pulled a lock of my dull, limp hair in front of my eyes. "I'd kill to be able to wash my hair," I told her.

"Why didn't you say so, honey? We can rig up a rail and get you a shower whenever you want," she said. "I just need to run and get you some shampoo, soap, that kind of thing and see what David might recommend."

"That would be fantastic," I said truthfully. "I feel really nasty."

"I can imagine," Maddie said. "At least you don't smell bad."

I sniffed halfheartedly at my pits. "I guess it's the lotion. Normally I reek if I go without my Speed Stick for longer than twelve hours."

"Well, sweetheart, I'm glad that's changed, then," Maddie said. "We can count that as a positive thing to come from this illness."

"That's one, then."

"Just one? What about all the time we've gotten to spend together?" Maddie said with a tone of mock-hurt.

"Okay, okay, two. And getting to know David better, that's three. And the time off, that's four. Is four enough?"

"For now," Maddie said. "We'll have you counting your blessings in the hundreds in no time, honey. Just sit back and watch."

I took her hand in mine, where it was still rubbing my shoulder. "Maddie, I haven't said thank you," I told her.

"Oh, sweetheart, you're like family now. There's no need to thank us."

"Of course there is," I replied. "This is above and beyond the call."

"We're happy to do it," she said. "It feels good to help someone out."

"Like you did with my credit cards," I said, turning to look her in the eye.

She seemed, for a moment, to be backing water and trying to come up with an excuse or a diversion, but I held her fast with my gaze and she relented with a small shrug and a sigh.

"Figured that out, huh," she said.

"Maddie," I said cautiously, "you and David shouldn't have done that. That wasn't your debt to pay, it was mine. I can't accept."

"But we wanted to," she protested.

"I know you did," I said, cutting her off. "And it's so kind and generous of you. I'm honored, more than I can ever tell you. Believe me, I don't have the words. But it's just not right."

"But it's done now," Maddie said. "We can't take it back."

"But I can pay back you and David, once I'm back on my feet," I said.

"Oh, honey..."

I held up a finger. "I insist, Maddie. Honestly. I'm going to pay you back every penny, with interest. It's important to me. I like to pay back what I owe."

"I should've known that you'd be like that," she said, smiling and a little wistful. "Okay, then. I'll talk to David about it, we'll see what sounds reasonable. Can we talk about it after then?"

"Okay," I told her. "But this can't be a brush-off. If I don't hear from you about this then I'm going to bring it up again and again."

"I know you will," she said. "You strike me as really stubborn once you make up your mind."

"That's a fair assessment," I said, a little smug.

"Now, about that shower," Maddie said, standing up and turning away. She wasn't quite fast enough to hide the telltale glimmer of a tear in her eye as she fussed with the bottles of lotion on the bedstand.

"Maddie, do you think there's any way for me to arrange a haircut?" I asked. "My hair is getting really long."

"Don't you dare," she said. "Don't you dare cut that gorgeous hair. I'd wished you would grow it out a little from the minute you stepped through my door and now that you have I'm not letting you take a single millimeter off of it until it's out of my control. Got it?"

I laughed. "I didn't know you felt so strongly about it."

"Well, I do. I take hair very seriously."

"You really think it looks good?" I asked.

"I really do. You're like a whole different person with your hair longer."

"Okay, then. I pay you back what I owe you in exchange for not cutting my hair."

She shook my hand. "Deal."

"Esce di mano a lui che la vagheggia prima che sia, a guisa di fanciulla che piangendo e ridendo pargoleggia, l'anima semplicetta che sa nulla, salvo che, mossa da lieto fattore, volentier torna a ciò che la trastulla."

Forth from the hand of Him, who fondles it before it is, like to a little girl weeping and laughing in her childish sport, issues the simple soul, that nothing knows, save that, proceeding from a joyous Maker, gladly it turns to that which gives it pleasure.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Purgatorio 16.085-090

Counting my blessings began to be a daily occurrence, just as Maddie had said. There were good things coming from this strange illness, wonderful things. For instance, I'd dropped all the unsightly weight that I'd gained by living off of sodas and junk food that I filched from the racks while managing the convenience store. My body was tight and well-muscled, and my energy seemed to grow by leaps and bounds every day that I exercised. I had a strength, endurance and flexibility that I'd never had before, as well - before the illness I could never stand flat-footed and place my fingers on the floor; now, I was able to press against the floor with my palms and have a little bend in my elbows. My morning stretch had been a painful, crackling affair before, but now it felt wonderful and I was able to almost touch my ass with the back of my head. I suspected I could do a back-bend if I put my mind to it. If it hadn't been for David's repeated warnings about overdoing it, I think I might have tried just for the hell of it.

I was, however, a little alarmed that my appetite hadn't returned the way it had before. I'd been a fairly prodigious eater, at least as far as portions were concerned, and now half a sandwich or a few crackers and I was stuffed. David mumbled some cryptic things about metabolism and cellular respiration rates that sounded very impressive, but it did worry me nonetheless. But it wasn't as though I didn't have energy or felt poorly because of it. Quite the opposite, in fact, and the needle-sticks on my fingers always showed a healthy amount of blood sugar. I decided to let it go. Maybe it was a combination of the drugs that David gave me and all the exercise. To break up the monotony of my bedridden days, I exercised constantly, both with and without the Unit attached. I was up to several miles per day on the elliptical trainer and long sessions daily with the weights and elastic bands and all the resistance training equipment. Honestly, I'd never felt that good or that healthy before in my life.

I also got to spend more and more time with Maddie, which was wonderful. Her smile and sense of humor were as important to my convalescence as any drug or exercise. She came every morning after my run and brushed my hair, told me funny stories of her girlhood and of her courtship with David, even a few misty, wistful tales of her beloved daughter.

"What was she like?" I asked out of the blue one day as I struggled through a particularly tough abdominal workout. I needed something to take my mind off the strain, and I felt like Maddie and I were good enough friends and that maybe, down deep, Maddie wanted to talk.

I didn't press through the long silence. Maddie's voice, when she finally answered, seemed as though it came from hundreds of miles away.

"She was like you, sweetheart. A lot like you. Stubborn and proud and self-reliant. She could be a very angry girl sometimes, but she had a sweetness about her, a *kindness*, that she could never repress no matter how angry or upset she got with you. And headstrong. From the cradle, that girl had her own ideas, and she never let anyone tell her different. She was a very strong girl and would have made a very strong woman. And I'll never get to see that, and I'll never forgive God for that."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I shouldn't've pried like that."

She smiled, suddenly. "Of course you should've," she corrected me. "You all but live in a house with her. Her ghost or her memory or whatever you want to call it. She's as much as a roommate for you and you know nothing at all about her."

"I didn't think about it that way," I said.

"I think she would have liked you," Maddie told me.

I snorted. "I doubt it," I said. "I've never been much of a hit with the ladies."

"You're a hit with me," Maddie told me.

"Yeah, well, we can't exactly date, can we?" I laughed. "You know what I mean. Women my own age. I just get a huge case of the awkward whenever I try. Your daughter probably would have laughed me out of the room."

"You're not awkward," Maddie contradicted, "you're unpracticed. There's a huge difference."

"Well, until I can keep from tripping over my tongue, I'm not likely to get much practice," I said. "It's sort of a Catch-22."

"Well, then, you need a coach. I volunteer."

"You're going to coach me on how to talk to women," I said, workout forgotten.

"Why not? There's weeks of this routine left, according to David, and what the hell else are we going to do? If you keep working out you're going to turn into a solid muscle and that's no good. And how many times can you take the same *Cosmo* test?"

"Good point," I said, towelling off and standing up from my little exercise mat. "When do we start?"

"Get cleaned up," Maddie told me, "and let me think up some things. This will be fun."

"Promise?" I asked.

"Promise," she told me. "Now scoot."

Even though I was exercising regularly and my muscle tone was restored, I still had some serious balance problems. Getting up and going to the bathroom was a slow, arduous process of finding handholds and sliding my feet along the floor until I was sure I wouldn't fall. David had told me it had something to do with my inner ear. Again, it was nothing I understood but something I could easily believe.

I showered quickly, finding myself looking forward to this little diversion, and changed into a white fluffy terri-cloth robe. Strange that my robe had been a little small for me before my illness but now seemed to hang past my calves and wrap my body far more than it had before. The sleeves came well past my palms, too. I *had* lost weight, a great deal of it. But was it my imagination, or had I lost *height* as well?

I did the swami-head-wrap thing with the towel over my wet hair and walked back into my room. Maddie was there with my IV bag transferred to a wheeled pole and the Unit in her hands.

"I thought we'd do this in the back garden," she said. "David okayed it. You could use some fresh air and a little sun."

"That would be fantastic," I told her, smiling.

We hooked my IV back up to the portable bag and hooked me up to the Unit. With its help I managed the stairs easily - somehow it electronically corrected my balance problems - and sat out in the dappled sunshine of the brick deck overlooking Maddie's backyard garden. The honeysuckle perfume on the air and the buzzing of the bees was wonderful. I heard a finch call from a nearby oak and couldn't keep the smile from my face.

"I know," Maddie said, reading my mind. "This is my favorite time of year. Here, put this on. David insisted."

I rubbed the lotion she gave me into my exposed skin and sat heavily in a chaise lounge. The Unit pulled me gracefully into a comfortable position.

Maddie took a seat beside me and handed me a pair of sunglasses before pouring us both a tall glass of iced tea from a pitcher beside her. She'd prepped the area beforehand, obviously. I'd been coming to the garden to do this long before I decided to come to the garden to do this. I loved that about Maddie. She ran the show from behind the scenes.

"So, sweetheart, why can't you talk to women?" she asked me point-blank.

I laughed. "I don't know. I've been trying to figure it out my whole life. I think it has something to do with attraction. Women I'm not attracted to, or women who aren't available like you, I can talk with no problem. But if it's someone I am attracted to, or someone I feel like I have a shot with, then *blammo* - instant stuttering imbecile."

"What kinds of things do you try to say?"

"I don't know. The usual. I try to be funny or profound or at least intriguing."

"There's the first problem," Maddie explained. "Women don't want to be impressed, honey. They want to be connected with."

"Connected how?" I asked.

"Okay, pretend for a second that you and I met at a party or something and you think you have a shot. You obviously have the *chutzpah* to talk to me first. What's your opening line?"

"I've already checked you out, seen you're not with somebody, made eye contact with you, all the pre-game stuff?" I asked.

She nodded. "I'm good to go."

"Hi, I'm Jason."

"Good. Vulnerable - you gave your name first - and unassuming. Gives me a lot of power in the exchange, so it's a brave move."

I whistled. "Wow. Never thought about it like that."

"Sweetie, this is a job interview. Everything said has weight and tells something about you. So then I catch the pass. Hi, Jason. I'm Maddie."

"Are you having a good time?"

She made a loud, 'buzzer' sound. "Bad move. It's too early in the exchange to care that much. You're still feeling each other out at this point. You want to *connect*, remember?"

"Then where should I go from there?"

"She's talked to you. She's interested. You have to trust that. She wouldn't have given you any response at all if she wasn't interested."

"Really?"

"Really. After that, let *her* take charge. Let her steer the conversation. She'll take you where she wants you to go. That's the connection."

"So, just let her take over."

"Right. It shows her that you trust her. It shows her you're not afraid to go where she leads. It places faith in her and recognizes her power. It's a very brave move."

"It just seems ass-backwards from everything else I've heard."

"And that has worked *how* well?" Maddie asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Right," I said. "So, maybe next I should open the floor to her, with something like, I dunno, 'What do you think of this party?'"

Maddie wrinkled her nose. "A little lame, but okay. You can be a little more slick than that, I should think. Try something like, 'Were you at so-and-so's party last week? This one is a lot better, right?'"

"Well, what if I wasn't at so-and-so's party last week."

"Sweetie, there doesn't even have to *be* a so-and-so's party last week. It's a ploy, an opening for this person. Just get them talking."

"Maybe I should be writing this down."

"You can if you want," she laughed, "but we're going to be practicing a lot more. You'll know it by heart by the time we're done."

"Okay," I said. "But here's a question. How do I know she wants me to come over and talk to her? That's another problem I have. I hate feeling like I'm bothering them."

"So you want to do the nonverbal stuff too? Oh, sweetheart, this is going to be great! I've got loads to teach you about that."

I sat back, enjoying the sun, and the outdoors, and my friend. I took every word she said as gospel, even though it went completely opposite to every piece of advice I'd ever gotten from the few players I knew. Maybe it was the friendship, or the illness, or some concoction in my IV bag, or even the Unit still nestled in the small of my back, but I soaked up everything I was told and believed it utterly, dreaming in the back of my mind about the time when I was well again and the social butterfly I was going to become.

Ω



SUMMARY: Looking for cheap rent, a young guy ends up at the home of a couple who have recently lost their daughter, little does he know they have plans for him to replace her.

NESSUN MAGGIOR DOLORE

Part Three

by Valerie Hope

"Questa fu la cagion che diede inizio loro a parlar di me; e cominciarsi a dir: «Colui non par corpo fittizio!»"

This was the cause that gave them a beginning to speak of me; and to themselves began they to say: "That seems not a factitious body!"

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Purgatorio 26.010-012

I HARDLY DARED TO BELIEVE that I was getting better. But all the evidence pointed to it. David was giving me less and less of the drugs that were aiding in my recovery, I was able to exercise and walk more and more without the help of the Unit, and I was able to stay awake longer without the frequent needs for rest. If not for the constant diarrhea - which David said was a side effect of the medications he was using - I felt better than I had ever felt in my life, and even my bouts of depression which I had suffered since childhood were no longer troubling me. I began to look forward to rejoining my life outside the house.

Maddie wasn't so sure about the last part, however. She'd come to really enjoy our conversations together, and our lessons which were alleviating my social ineptitude. I could understand her reluctance to let me go. The house could be abysmally lonely, with the ghost of their dead daughter and her workaholic husband the only other occupants. I resolved to make as much time for my new friend as I could, but I couldn't just sit here forever. I had a life to live, and a debt to pay back, and I needed to get out of the house and start living again. I tried to explain this to Maddie over iced tea in the garden.

"I know, I know," she said to me. "I've just gotten so *used* to all of this."

"So have I," I told her by way of placation. "And I intend to keep as much of this as time permits. You're like family now. I never had a family I actually liked before. I intend to keep it that way."

She patted my hand. "But."

I sighed. "But. I have to have a life of my own, Maddie. I can't just stay here forever, sponging off of you and David. You two have been amazing to me. I can't tell you how grateful I am."

"You're young," Maddie said. "And full of life. You need to be out in the world."

"Yeah, I do," I said as gently as I could.

"I understand, sweetheart, honestly," she told me. "I'm just sad. Bless you for trying, but you can't fix that. I'll get over it, I promise. I'm just a doddering old fart who's resistant to change. That's all."

"You're as far from old fart as I can possibly imagine, Maddie," I told her. "But okay. Look, we'll make a date. As soon as I get a job and know what my days off are, I'll devote one of them to you, and at least one night a week. More, if possible. It'll be just us and we'll take the phone off the hook."

She smiled a faraway smile. "That sounds really good."

"And in the meantime, I'm planning to work days again. So we'll have evenings together. And you and David can come by and see me at work, help break up the time a little."

She gestured to the classified ads I had in my hand. "Find anything promising?"

"Not much," I said. "The job market hasn't gotten any better since I've been sick."

"Poor baby," she said. "What about if David or I made some calls?"

I grinned. "You've both done so much already."

"It's okay, sweetheart. If you haven't noticed, he and I *like* helping you."

I laughed. "I suppose that's pretty obvious. And the phone isn't exactly ringing off the hook, even though I've covered the earth in a fine layer of my résumé. Okay. I'd love the help. Thanks."

She patted my hand again and stook briskly. "I'll talk to David right away."

I just sat there, enjoying the outside and the cool breezes that chased each other through the verdant garden. David's magic lotion had begun to work its wonders, and I opened my robe to let the dappled sunlight get to my skin. I was already developing a smooth, even amber cast to my skin. I loved it. I'd never been able to tan before, I'd always burned lobster red after only a few minutes in the sun. Now I was starting to look more and more like an outdoorsy sort. The tan was making my teeth look whiter and my hair look light. I really liked the way it looked.

My hair was pulled back in a clip I'd borrowed from Maddie, a simple unisex-looking affair that kept it out of my face. I still wanted a haircut, but I did so in secret because any mention of cutting my hair sent Maddie into apoplexy. It wasn't *bad* looking, by any stretch - it framed my face nicely and was shiny, soft and healthy - but I was a little tired of it falling down into my eyes constantly and tickling my cheeks and the tops of my shoulders. But I felt that shoulder-length hair was a very small price to pay to keep Maddie happy.

And I was also thankful that I was starting to put on a little bit of weight after my illness. My physical therapy had kept my body firm and supple as it had never been before, which was a real bonus considering I'd never been in very good shape prior to getting sick, but I was worried that I couldn't seem to put on any weight at all. The scale in the bathroom said I was only about 105 pounds, which was far too light for health, considering my age and height. But slowly those numbers were starting to crawl up, and I was starting to look a little softer around the hips and butt. I was a firm believer in the concept of 'too skinny' and seeing myself actually start to get some rounded edges was a vast relief. Also, it made my hairless, amber skin look much healthier.

A lot about me had changed, but I still felt the same inside. And even though my life before I'd moved into David and Maddie's basement wasn't all that much to brag about, I still felt a very real excitement at the prospect of rejoining it.

I walked back into the house, the light hum of the Unit accompanying me. The little box on the velcro belt was second nature to me now, I barely noticed whether it was on or off. Muffin, the dog, ran up and began jumping up and down, nuzzling my hands and covering me with dog slobber. I was relieved. When I'd first moved in, the dog had hated me and spent all her waking hours trying to figure a way to kill and eat me without getting into trouble from Maddie. Now she seemed to have decided that I was her best friend. I scratched behind the floppy ears gratefully with nails in dire need of a trim. The dog flopped over and exposed her belly to me. I knelt easily - which I couldn't even do before I got sick and got introduced to the Unit - and paid the dog some attention before I headed towards the stairs.

Maddie met me coming down. "Oh! There you are. David called his friend Dr. Eagin over at the clinic where he used to consult. They need a receptionist and filing clerk over there very badly. Do you think you could go by this afternoon?"

I looked at the clock. "This afternoon? I don't know, Maddie. I don't have anything to wear, I don't know anything about the clinic, I haven't done any research..."

She waved a hand dismissively. "Forget all that. I can help you with everything. And the clinic is only seven blocks away, you could walk it if you wanted."

I rubbed my temples. "I, well, I suppose I could..."

She hugged me. "Great! Hustle upstairs and take a shower, and I'll sort through finding you something to wear. Don't worry about a thing, sweetie. You're a shoo-in, Dr. Eagin owes David ninety million different kinds of favor. You could show up in bunny slippers and a bathrobe and you'd still get the job."

"Do you know what it pays? Will I have to wear a suit, or scrubs, or what?"

"We'll sort all that out later. If I know Frank, it'll pay really well. He's a plastic surgeon and he's rolling in it. The hours should be pretty easy and he'll probably give you a clothing allowance if you have to wear anything special. Plus, I'll take you shopping for work clothes to celebrate. How does that sound?"

"Maddie, you help me too much. I can do things for myself, you know."

"Of course you can, sweetie, but it's so much *fun* to help you! You don't know how much I enjoy it. And David does too, even though he's a grump about the whole thing sometimes."

"But, still..."

Maddie's face got serious. "Honey, you don't know how empty this house was before you got here. You can't ever know. You've brought something back to us that I can't even describe. It's like it's light in here for the first time since... since it happened. I'm not trying to make what happened go away, sweetheart. Honestly, I'm not. But, helping you like this, and being your friend like this - well, it makes me not miss her so horribly."

I hugged her. "That was all you had to say."

She smiled, and her eyes were glistening. "So you'll let me help?"

"I look awful in blue," I told her.

"Right," she said. "Eighty-six on the blue. Got it. Now run upstairs and clean up. I'll have you all fixed up by the time you're done."

I took my time showering and rubbed my face, wondering if I needed a shave. My face was smooth - smoother than it had ever been. I'd been one of those people whose face was blue with stubble not eight hours after I shaved. Strange that I didn't have stubble all over the place now. Maybe another side effect of David's drugs? I made a mental note to ask him about it.

I was just standing there, letting the hot water beat against my back, and never really noticed the faint bluish mist coming from the exhaust fan, or even the strange smell in the steamy air of the shower. All I know is that I started to feel good. *Really* good. I toweled off and dried my lengthening hair with a blow dryer and scampered downstairs quickly in my robe and slippers. Maddie was waiting with an expectant look on her face.

"How do you feel, honey?"

"Great," I answered honestly.

"I have some clothes for you here," she told me. She handed me over a dark business suit on a hanger. I took it, appreciating the fine cut and the way the dark charcoal with pinstripes would look against my tanned skin. I took them off the hanger and looked at them strangely.

"This is a skirt, Maddie," I told her.

"Of course, honey," she said. "You always wear skirts."

Did I? I couldn't remember. But Maddie would never lie to me, would she? If Maddie said I wore skirts all the time, then I must wear skirts all the time.

"If you say so," I said.

"I picked out all stuff that you like to wear, sweetheart," Maddie told me. "I'd never make you dress in anything you didn't like. Or anything you didn't look good in. But hurry along, now, Dr. Eagin will be waiting for you."

I looked at the unfamiliar clothes - even though Maddie said they were my favorites, I couldn't seem to remember how they went on. "Can you help me, Maddie?"

She smiled. "Poor baby. Nervous?"

I laughed shakily. "I guess I must be." The world was completely adrift around me, nothing made sense, I couldn't remember what my favorite clothes were or how to put them on, nothing. The only constant was Maddie, and I couldn't keep myself from clinging to her for all I was worth.

"I don't think you're going to need a bra with this," she said. "But here. Put these on. I always like to wear something sexy and frilly when I go on an interview. I like having my naughty little secret."

She handed me a pair of lacy, baby pink panties with a little bow on the front and a high-legged thong back. If they'd come from any other hand than Maddie's, I would have protested. But

since she was the one handing them to me, I didn't object. I stepped into them unquestioningly and pulled them up around my hairless legs.

"Tuck your danglies back between your legs, sweetie, or you'll spoil the line," she instructed as she began tearing into a cardboard package. I tucked my testicles and penis back between my legs and let the tight panties hold them into place. It took a little getting used to, but it didn't hurt or anything.

She handed me a filmy wisp of soft, sheer taupe fabric. "Stockings," she explained. "I know you could get away with pantyhose with this suit, but I'm a traditionalist. Women should wear stockings. Here, put them on like this." She showed me how to roll them up my smooth legs and then helped me keep them in place with a pink garter belt that matched my lacy panties.

Maddie giggled. "You look like a porn star," she told me.

I looked down. "I kinda feel like one, too."

She wagged her eyebrows. "That's the idea. You're going to have so much confidence in your interview, knowing all that sin is lurking just underneath your clothes. And the other people in the room won't have the faintest idea why. You're going to love it."

I grinned. I was actually having fun, in spite of all the confusion. "What's next?"

She handed me a bright, eye-popping fuschia silk blouse with a butterfly collar.

"That's a little loud, don't you think?" I asked.

"Not for you, sweetie," Maddie said. "Besides, you want them to notice you, right?"

I slipped it on, worrying myself for a while over the buttons down the side, under my arm, until Maddie helped me out. Then the dark grey pinstripe skirt and blazer, which fit like it was tailored for me. With that and the day-glo purple blouse, I had to admit I looked pretty sensational. Like one of the diva businesswomen on the soap operas.

"You like?" Maddie asked, admiring me over my shoulder in the mirror.

"Yeah," I said. "Now what?"

"Upstairs," Maddie said. "Something with your hair, and some jewelry, and you'll be all set. Dr. Eagin will flip over you."

I still felt a little uncertain and nervous, but I let Maddie drag me upstairs. She pulled and tugged and fussed over my hair and coated it liberally with various gels, mousses and sprays. She found a lovely understated gold choker and clipped it around my neck and clipped on earrings ("You always wear these earrings with this choker," she explained to me to ease my discomfort) to match. She lined my eyes with dark liner and applied a liberal coat of mascara ("Just for some drama," she told me, "and you never used to complain if I went a little heavy."), a little color for my cheeks and a bright shade of pink lipstick ("I know we don't have time to do your nails, honey," Maddie said, "but you're running behind. But at least your lips will match your blouse.") and a coat of gloss. She put small gold rings on the index and middle fingers of both hands and another on my right thumb ("What's the big deal? You said you thought thumb rings were cute before.") and helped me stuff my ID and other sundries into a leather purse with a gold link chain ("Where else are you going to carry everything? Do you see pockets in that suit?"). She dug in her own closet and found a pair of Italian leather pumps with a gold

chain across the toe and a four-inch spike heel. I looked at Maddie like she'd grown a second head.

"Are you out of your mind? I'll fall," I said.

"You never had trouble before," Maddie said.

"But this is a job interview! If I fall I'll make a fool out of myself, Maddie, and even with you telling me I don't have problems with shoes like that, I look at those and I have this absolutely certain feeling that I'm going to do a face-plant if I try to walk in them!" I said, plaintively. I had to be at my interview very soon.

"Look, wait right here," she said, running next door to my room. She came back with the Unit.

"We'll hook you up," she explained, pulling my clothes aside to hook the electrodes discreetly under my suit. "I'll adjust it a little and you'll be able to walk, no problem."

I kissed her cheek, careful not to smudge my lipstick. "Thanks, Maddie, you're a lifesaver."

"Don't I know it," she told me, hooking up electrodes two at a time. "Pay me back by getting this job, okay?"

"Deal," I said, helping her.

Maddie didn't let me walk the seven blocks to the clinic. She handed me a set of car keys without batting an eye, led me to the garage and started taking a tarp off of a slick little Nissan 350Z, all gleaming silver, immaculate and clean, with vanity plates that read "Lil Angel."

"I hope you can drive stick," she said.

"I hope I can drive, period," I said, looking forlornly at the unfamiliar footwear. The Unit was doing wonders, but I didn't know how well it knew how to drive.

"Just be careful, sweetie, that's an awful lot of car," Maddie cautioned me, and went back into the house. I unlocked the door with the key dangle with a merry *chirp* of the alarm and sat inside, putting my borrowed attaché case in the front seat. I looked the interior over - top of the line sound system and a cute little stained-glass butterfly hanging from the rearview with some Mardi Gras beads. It slowly dawned on me. This was Josie's car. It had been untouched, obviously, down to the fast-food wrappers and discarded clothing in the floorboards and the pack of Virginia Slims cigarettes in the console. Her lipstick and hairbrush were still in the glove box.

I started the engine, still in a daze at Maddie's letting me drive her daughter's car. She must really love and trust me indeed to make a gesture like that. I resolved to not let her down. Her daughter had died in a car. I was *definitely* coming back in one piece. So what if this was my first experience driving a six-speed. With the weight of what Maddie gifted me with hanging over me, I wouldn't even leave third gear. I buckled up, released the hand brake and eased out onto the gravel drive to face the seven blocks to the clinic - in heels.

"Vedi se far si dee l'omo eccellente, sì ch'altra vita la prima relinqua."

See if man ought to make him excellent, so that another life the first may leave!

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Paradiso 09.042-043

I pulled back into the garage, turning down the stereo. I'd been so preoccupied with driving and driving safely - Maddie hadn't lied, it was an awful lot of car - that I hadn't messed with the sound system there or back. Apparently, Josie had liked loud music. I'd listened to Britney Spears' *In the Zone* most of the way through at ear-splitting levels, and strangely enough I'd actually enjoyed it a little. It made me want to dance, and fuck, and dance some more. I hadn't ever had a reaction to music like that. It was strange, but it was also exciting. It made me feel ways I'd never felt before, and I found myself wanting to feel a little more, to explore this newness that I'd just discovered.

I shut off the engine and got out, maneuvering in the heels and skirt as if I'd been born in them. I didn't know if it was the Unit or myself or some strange combination of both, to be honest. I walked back inside, humming *Brave New Girl* to myself and swinging my purse by the chain in big lazy circles. Maddie was waiting with David in the kitchen.

"Well?" Maddie said.

"I start Monday," I said, unable to repress the smile. Shit. I'd hoped to make it a surprise, coming in all disappointed and resigned and then springing it on them when they tried to comfort me. I just couldn't. Maddie leapt up, clapping her hands, and David caught me up in a rib-creaking hug.

"I'm so proud of you, honey," Maddie said, joining the hug.

"It's a really great job," I explained, sitting down and helping myself to lemonade. Maddie had added a little kick to it, too - the taste of the vodka she'd mixed in made me gasp a little but I enjoyed it. "I work seven to four, with an hour lunch, and I'll make twelve-fifty an hour. Much better than the Seven-Eleven."

"That's wonderful," David said, stroking my shoulder. "I'm so happy for you."

"Listen, I want to take you both out to celebrate," I told them. "Someplace fancy."

"Oh, honey, you don't have to do that," Maddie protested.

I held up a hand. "I want to. I wouldn't have even found the job if it wasn't for you two, much less been in any condition to get it. You two have really done a lot for me, and I want to say thanks. Come on, get your coats. It's my treat."

I hustled upstairs and shed my interview clothes, missing the feel of the silk and lace against my hairless skin. Wrapping myself in my robe, I walked downstairs and found Maddie tidying up in the kitchen.

"Could you help me find something to wear again?" I asked.

She smiled. "Of course. Be there in a minute."

David was in my room when I got back. He fussed over me a little, taking my pulse and blood pressure and giving me a shot of something. I felt the familiar rush of energy - what was that stuff he was giving me? - and sat on the bed waiting until Maddie came in with an armload of clothes. Muffin was hot on her heels, nuzzling my hand and trying to climb my shins for more ear-scratching. I obliged.

"Here you go, baby," Maddie said, dumping the clothes on the bed. "They're all your favorites. I brought you a bunch of different choices. Now I have to go get ready."

Excited, I picked through them one by one. If Maddie hadn't told me they were my favorites, I never would have guessed. Everything was bright colors - apparently I had a predilection for pink - and revealing cuts, and I must have had a thing for short skirts as well. I didn't remember ever wearing skirts, even ever wanting to *wear* a skirt, but if Maddie said these were my favorites... Maddie wouldn't lie.

I finally settled on a hot pink halter top which bared most of my tanned back and left my belly button bared. I was very glad my stomach was so flat. I paired it with a flouncy little denim skirt which barely covered my thighs and set it off with three different pink leather belts, one with heart-shaped silver studs, one with rhinestones that spelled out 'Party Girl' and the third with sequins and glitter. I opted out of the heels and selected some pink sequined platform flip-flops and a distressed denim jacket - cropped, of course - to go over it. The only earrings I could find that went with were some big rhinestone hearts that dangled low against the tops of my shoulders but looked extremely cute with the outfit. Luckily, my lipstick matched the halter top so I didn't really have to do anything with my makeup except repair it. I finger-fluffed my hair a little, letting the product that was already in it hold its shape, and transferred my things into an adorable little pink Coach handbag that snuggled into my armpit. I decided to try tonight without the Unit's help. With David there to troubleshoot me if anything went wrong, I had confidence that things would be fine.

I scampered downstairs, taking the steps two at a time, and sat on the couch. I made sure I had enough money for the night - the last of my cash reserves, but now that I was employed again that would change soon. I had everything else, too, my car keys - did I need to give those back to Maddie? I couldn't remember - and sunglasses and lipstick and hairbrush and the pack of Virginia Slims and disposable lighter from the car. It all *looked* like mine, all things that should be in my purse. That had always been in my purse, now that I thought about it. The only thing that really worried me was my I.D., which looked nothing like me any more. Six foot one was a lie - I couldn't be an inch over five-five, now, and I certainly wasn't 185 pounds, either. I don't even think I could technically be considered brown-haired, come to think of it. The highlights in my hair were more golden than russet, and in most lights I looked more of a blonde than a brunette.

"Hey - don't you look cute?" David said as he came downstairs, wearing a polo and khakis and looking quite dapper.

I couldn't help it - that made me smile for a reason I couldn't really put a finger on. "Thanks!" I chirped happily. "You look handsome."

He turned a slow, shuffling circle. "I clean up pretty nice."

I laughed. "Yeah, you do."

"Whatcha got there?" David asked, pointing at my hand in an uncharacteristically effusive mood.

"Just my drivers' license," I said. "I was looking at it. It's funny. None of this suits me any more. The picture doesn't look like me or anything."

He took it. "It sure doesn't," he remarked, looking it over. "Y'know, we should fix this. You could get in trouble if your I.D. doesn't match you. Somebody might think you stole it or something."

"Oh, shit - I have a ton of forms and stuff to fill out before I start my job. I'll have to get a new one soon," I said, a little panicked.

"Don't worry about a thing," David said, patting my shoulder absently. "We'll sort that right out, first thing tomorrow. Maddie wants to take you shopping anyway, so we can just make a day of it."

"Ugh. The DMV."

"It's tolerable if you have Maddie there, trust me," David said, chuckling.

Maddie came down in a flurry of hugs and kisses and chivvied us all to the door and out to the Cunningham's town car, and off to the restaurant. It was definitely a cut above the average place to go and eat on a Tuesday night. We didn't have to wait very long, thankfully - I was starting to get a little tired from the emotions and strain of the day - and the host led us back to a four-top table. I noticed I got some looks as I passed by some tables - was my makeup wrecked? Something wrong with my hair? Did my outfit make me look like a dork or something? I began to fret, but Maddie steadied me with a hand on my arm.

"You look fantastic, honey," she reassured me. "They're not staring because you look bad. They're staring because you look *good*. Just enjoy it. You worked really hard to look that good and you should reap the rewards."

I let that sink in. It *did* feel good. Damn good. I started to even strut a little. But strange that it was more the boys in the room that were admiring me than the girls. I filed that away to think about later. It didn't exactly make me uncomfortable, but it did surprise me and the fact that I didn't have a stronger reaction to it scared me a little.

Then, when I realized that the waiter had pulled out my chair for me, it began to sink in.

"David, Maddie - what is happening to me? Why is everybody treating me like I'm a..."

David leaned over and I felt a sharp sting on my neck and heard a hiss. I barely saw him palming something silver into his pocket as he took his hand away. The thought that I'd been trying to express liquefied and swirled away like molasses down a drain and the rest of my sentence came out as an incoherent mumble.

Maddie stroked the back of my hand and whispered in my ear. "Don't worry yourself so much, sweetheart. You're a young woman. You've always been a young woman. You've been very ill and you've forgotten, but David and I are here to help you, to teach you. Do you believe us?"

"Of course I do," I mumbled.

"What is your gender, baby?" Maddie asked in a hoarse whisper.

"I'm a young woman," I said.

"Do you feel better now?" she asked me.

"Yeah," I said. "Thanks, Maddie."

She leaned in. "What kind of talk is that? It may be fashionable for girls your age to call their parents by their first names these days, but it's not acceptable around here, young lady. Understand?"

I felt a little ashamed. "Sorry, Mom. Sorry, Daddy."

David patted my shoulder. "It's okay, honey bunny. Honest mistake."

"Can we order, Mom? I'm starved."

"Of course we can," Maddie said, opening her menu. "And when we get home, we can move you out of that horrible hospital bed and back into your own room where you belong. How does that sound?"

I grinned. "About time."

The waiter brought water and a bottle of the house wine. He poured us all a glass - even though he stopped before pouring for me with a raised eyebrow but went ahead at a nod from David and Maddie. When he left, I gave David - *Daddy* - a look.

"What was that about?" I asked.

He smiled. "You *are* only eighteen, sweetheart," he explained.

"I guess I am," I said. "Oh. That explains it. I'm too young to drink."

"We never thought so," Maddie said. "You're very mature for your age, and David and I have always given you access to wine and beer so you wouldn't think it was forbidden. So many girls, they get to college away from parents who've never let them near alcohol, and they go crazy and drink stupid and hurt themselves. We never wanted that to happen to you. You drink very responsibly."

That made perfect sense to me. I raised my glass. "Let's have a toast to my new job."

They raised theirs and clinked. "To your new life," David corrected.

"We love you, Josie," Maddie added.

"I love you too, Mom," I said happily, sipping wine.

"E canterò di quel secondo regno dove l'umano spirito si purga e di salire al ciel diventa degno."

And of that second kingdom will I sing wherein the human spirit doth purge itself, and to ascend to heaven becometh worthy.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Purgatorio 01.004-006

"Josephine Nicole, get down here! We're going to be late!" Mom called from downstairs. I opened my eyes sleepily. I'd had a very strange dream - I think I was a man in it, and not the kind of man I normally dreamed about - and I was both glad it was over but also curious, wondering where on earth a dream like that had come from.

I sat up and tossed the pink fluffy covers off. Mom really liked pink and fluffy and frilly for me, and I allowed it. One of these days, though, everything was going to be slick satin in dark colors or animal prints. Still, Mom liked thinking of me as a little girl, and it made her happy and more importantly kept her off my case.

"I'll be down in a minute," I called back, wondering why my voice sounded so deep. It didn't sound at all like my usual rough soprano, perpetually hoarse from years of yelling on the

sidelines as a cheerleader. Mom would have the coffee going and Dad would be puttering around upstairs in his lab. Another typical morning. What did I do in the mornings? For some reason my head was full of blanks. I mean, I knew the basics - I was Josephine Nicole Cunningham - "Josie" to all her friends - and I was eighteen years old and had just graduated high school. I knew I worked at a doctor's office close by and I drove a silver Nissan 350Z. From the posters on my wall apparently I dug Britney and the Pussycat Dolls and Madonna, and evidently I had a thing for The Rock since I had posters of him up as well. I could tell that the stuffed animals were another sop for my mom, to keep her feeling like I was still a kid. As was the fluffy flannel pink nightgown I was wearing and the Bullwinkle slippers at the side of the bed. Except, well, okay... the Bullwinkle slippers were really cute.

Muffin barely stirred at the foot of the bed. I stretched and wondered what I did in the mornings. Probably the same things everybody did. Brushed their teeth, had some coffee, those kinds of things. But I had a hard time remembering even being up mornings for a long time, like the time when everybody else was just getting up was usually the time I was going to bed. Maybe I went clubbing a lot or something. And why wasn't I more alarmed about not being able to remember all of this stuff? I was so calm about it all.

I sat at my desk and looked outside. The garden was just like I remembered it. I scratched my head and tried to remember, but there was nothing there. Nothing at all, just a hazy grey blank.

I dug in my purse. Somehow I knew everything in there was mine, but I didn't recognize it at all. I knew the birth control and the Xanax were mine - they had my name on the prescription labels. The lipstick and the hairbrush and the Platinum Visa. But I didn't remember *getting* them, only having them. I didn't remember ever smoking in my entire life, but I also knew the cigarettes were mine. And vaguely, I remembered that I liked one first thing in the morning before I brushed my teeth. Absentmindedly, I lit one. I didn't know what to expect as I sucked the smoke down and ended up in a coughing fit. How could I actually *like* these things? But I knew I had to, else why would I have a pack in my purse? I kept at it, sucking the smoke down until I stopped coughing and got really dizzy and a really good tingly feeling all over.

I opened my window and tapped my ashes over the sill. While I smoked, I pulled my school backpack over with my toe and dug through it. A little pink Razr cellphone with a flat battery and a day planner which had no entries past six months ago. Another pack of cigarettes, this one half-empty, and some tampons. I dug faster, looking at the folders full of old homework - apparently I took a lot of business and design classes in high school, and a blue fabric-lined folder with my diploma in it. A few pictures of people I knew I should have recognized but somehow didn't. And down in the bottom I found the better part of an eight-ball of cocaine and several tabs of X in a little zipper bag at the bottom of the side pocket. Were these *my* drugs? I didn't remember ever doing drugs, except for a little marijuana once when I was in college.

But wait. I'd just graduated high school. I hadn't *been* to college yet.

I tossed my cigarette butt out the window - I'd smoked it down - and stood, giving myself a little hug. This was weird.

"Josie, girl, get a grip," I told myself softly. I slipped on my Bullwinkles and headed downstairs.

"Hey," I said muzzily as I saw my Mom setting breakfast on the table. Just cereal for me, which made sense. From the way I looked, I apparently was real conscious about my weight and looks.

"Hey yourself," she said, wrinkling her nose. "Have you been smoking in the house again?"

I nodded.

"Josie," she said with a long-suffering lilt, dragging my name out. "Sweetie, your father and I are willing to let you smoke - we don't like it - but all we ask is not to do it in the house. Is that too much to ask?"

"Sorry," I said, a little abashed. "I forgot."

She rubbed my shoulder. "Just don't do it again, okay? You know how your dad gets."

Did I? I wondered, but I nodded, mouth full of cereal.

"What are we going to be late for?" I asked.

"Hm?"

"You said we were going to be late," I said. "What for?"

"Our girls' day out, sweetheart, don't you remember?" she told me. "We've been planning it for weeks. We have to go get your new drivers' licence to replace the one you lost, and then we were going to go shopping for work clothes and get manicures and then go get your ears pierced like you've been begging me for months."

"Oh," I said. There was something resembling a memory there, but it was hazy. "That does sound like a lot of fun."

"We also have to get this place cleaned up, too," she said. "For when your friends come over tomorrow night."

"My friends?"

"You invited them over a week ago," she explained patiently. "All the girls from your cheerleading squad. You wanted to have an after-graduation party by the pool, remember?"

"I guess... I mean, no. Mom, what's wrong with me? I can't remember any of this."

She sat down across from me. "You remember being sick?"

"Yeah," I said. "Bits and pieces."

"Your father says that your fever was very, very high. That memory loss and the like are to be expected. We were so scared, honey. But don't worry, okay? Your Dad and I will help you remember everything."

I sighed. "This is kinda scary."

"I can't imagine," Mom said. "But we're here for you. Just trust us."

"I do," I said. "Just real freaky, y'know?"

She patted the back of my hand. I *definitely* remembered that. "Nothing spending a whole lot of money won't cure, right?"

I grinned. "I guess not."

She stood briskly, in that let's-get-going way she had. "Okay, young lady, time to get a move on. You have to get dressed and your father wanted you to come to his lab before you started getting ready. And do something with your hair. You only get the one drivers' license picture."

"I hate my hair," I grumped.

"You want some help with it?" Mom asked. "I am a hairdresser, after all."

I looked at her adoringly. How lucky was I to have such cool parents? "Would you?"

"Of course," she said. "But we have to boogie. Go see your dad and get in the shower. I'll meet you up there."

"Thanks, Mom," I said, kissing her cheek and scampering up the stairs. The whole exchange made me feel better. I remembered that being how it was. Mom helping me and listening and always being there for me, and Daddy's presence upstairs constantly, always checking on me and worrying and wondering how I was. It felt so comfortably familiar to me.

It felt like home.

Ω



SUMMARY: Looking for cheap rent, a young guy ends up at the home of a couple who have recently lost their daughter, little does he know they have plans for him to replace her.

NESSUN MAGGIOR DOLORE

Part Four

by Valerie Hope

"Ritorna a tua scienza, che vuol, quanto la cosa è più perfetta, più senta il bene, e così la doglienza."

Return unto thy science, which wills, that as the thing more perfect is, the more it feels of pleasure and of pain.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Inferno 06.106 - 108

I KNOCKED ON THE HEAVY door to Daddy's lab and didn't go in until I heard the muffled "come" from inside. There was never any telling what went on in there, and as much as I may have wanted to just barge in, even I could tell that could be dangerous to myself and to my father. Sensitive things were going on in there. I didn't want to ruin anything, no matter how curious I was.

The inside of the lab was well lit from sunlight, and everything was a gleaming antiseptic white. Daddy kept the place immaculate. All kinds of heavy, brown-glass bottles lined shelves against the far wall, labeled with chemical names. Microscopes and computers and other lab paraphernalia lined the benches against the walls and the tables in the middle of the room. Some very pretty flowers and plants were against another wall in bell jars and habitat bubbles, and a huge periodic table hung over them.

"Hi, daddy," I said happily, kissing his cheek from where he was working on one of the lab's many computers. A 3-D graphic of a DNA helix and all kinds of indecipherable chemical formulas were flashing on it.

"Hi, punkin," he said back, scarcely looking up.

"Mom said you wanted to see me about something," I reminded him.

He started. "Oh? Oh. Oh, yes. Of course." He went over to a lab table and picked up a syringe and fitted a needle to it before drawing up something from a hand-labeled vacuum bottle. "This is an immunization treatment. A vaccine I developed to whatever it was that made you sick. I want to make sure there's no going back to the way you were."

"Won't I already be immune? I got better, right?" I asked.

"I don't want to take any chances, sweetheart," Daddy told me. "Please."

I rolled up my sleeve and let him inject me. Whatever it was felt really cold as it flowed up my arms. He handed me a few unlabeled bottles after he covered it with gauze, all filled with heavy white liquids, almost creams.

"Give those to your mother, she asked for them," he told me. "You two girls have a good time today, okay? Tell your mother not to spend too much money."

I gave him an impish look. "*She's* not the one you need to be telling that."

By the time I got undressed and started running the shower, my chest - particularly my nipples - was itching like fire and I was having some awful cramps in my groin. I sat on the toilet and rocked back and forth, remembering the painful diarrhea I'd had while I was sick and wondering if Daddy's vaccine wasn't making some of the symptoms recur. Reaching down between my smooth legs, I felt for the funny lump that had been between my legs the last couple days and found that it was receding. It only felt half the size it had before and seemed to almost be shrinking under my fingers. I scratched my chest and nipples as well, which seemed to be pink and swollen for some reason.

A knock on the door and Mom's voice: "Why aren't you in the shower?"

"Just a second," I grunted between cramps.

"Are you all right, honey?"

"Yeah," I said. "Daddy gave me a shot and it's giving me cramps. I'll be fine."

"Should I go get him?"

"No, I'm okay," I said. "But I think I'm allergic. My chest itches real bad."

I heard Mom chuckle through the door. "It's not allergies, it's that rash you got while you were in bed. From the bleach I used on your sheets. Did Daddy give you some bottles of lotion for me?"

"Yeah," I said.

"There's a pink-colored one in there and the bottle is marked '17-A2' on the bottom. It's the stuff your dad cooked up for that rash. It's worked like a charm. Hop in the shower and rub it on your chest real good. Use lots, sweetie."

I wiped myself - the funny little lump was almost gone, thank goodness - and jumped into the running shower. The hot water felt wonderful and I slathered two giant handfuls of the lotion on my chest, one for each side. The itching faded into some really nice tingles. *Really* nice tingles. I couldn't quit rubbing it in, it felt so nice. Strangely, it seemed like my little tits swelled in my hands, going from the little bumps into a pleasant double handful in the space of a few seconds. I pinched my erect nipples and made myself groan. They filled my palms and overflowed a little before the tingles regrettably stopped. I thought for a moment about using more lotion, for more tingles, but then I thought better of it.

I heard the bathroom door open and saw Mom's silhouette through the curtain. I heard her put some towels on the counter and then she handed the other bottles over the top of the curtain rod.

"These are for your hair, sweetheart," she said over the rushing water. "Wash your hair and then condition with the one marked '26-HE6.' The other one, the little one, is for your eyes. It doesn't sting, just rub it in real good. Your dad says it's to prevent infection from your time in bed."

"An infection in my eyes?"

"You know what he's like," Mom said, exasperated. "Just put it on and make an old man sleep better. It's not like it's going to hurt you."

"Right," I said.

I lathered myself up with Oil of Olay scented body wash and took my time, using an exfoliator (I hadn't had time to really care for my skin in weeks) and a good scrubbing to get the dull, lusterless "I've-been-sick" pallor off my skin and restore it to a healthy glow. I'm not sure why or how I knew to do what I was doing, but I had vague recollections of a pale-skinned woman in a white bodystocking explaining the basics of skin-care to me. Then I washed my hair with Pantene and rubbed the conditioner Daddy cooked up for me into my hair and worked it in vigorously. It felt wonderful - like the tingles on my boobs only this time on my scalp. They hadn't said how long to leave it in, so I assumed it was a ten-minute treatment and just shaved my bikini line and pits in the meantime and applied the weird eye stuff from Daddy. It tingled too, but less and for a shorter period. I rinsed it off and then checked the little digital clock above the mirror outside the shower before rinsing out the conditioner.

A huge, thick coil of wet hair flopped down against my shoulders! I jumped. My hair had been just to the tops of my shoulders when I'd gotten in the shower, and now it was easily past my shoulderblades and maybe even longer. Its wet weight tugged hard against the back of my head. Wrapping myself in a towel, I jumped out of the shower and wiped the steam off the mirror to get a look. It must have grown nearly two feet in ten minutes! All this shiny, thick hair was really mine, too - I gave an experimental tug on my long tresses and felt the pain in my scalp that said this beautiful long hair belonged to me!

"Oo, sweetheart, it looks so *good* on you! I'm so glad!" Mom said from the doorway.

"Can you believe this? It... grew! Like two feet!"

Mom picked up Dad's mystery bottle. "Worked like a charm, just like David said it would."

"Dad made that work? Oh my gawd, Mom, you're going to make a fortune."

"We still don't have the patent yet, and the FDA will want to look at it," Mom said, smiling, "but I might just have that international cosmetics empire yet."

I checked my hair, vamping happily in the mirror, so excited that I didn't even notice that my eyelashes brushed my cheeks now when I blinked and were thick enough to block light, soft as cat's ears, or that my breasts jiggled deliciously whenever I jumped up and down with excitement or tried to brush my teeth. After all, I was a healthy young girl and healthy young girls frequently had thick, long eyelashes and lovely pert little 34B breasts.

Not to mention that the magic conditioner that Daddy had cooked up for me has also, I discovered as I blow-dried the thick mass of locks, turned my hair a lustrous vanilla blonde with shimmering golden highlights. Against my tanned, glowing skin it made me look like the

perfect beach bunny wet dream. I couldn't help but strike sexy Playboy centerfold poses in my mirror, to my delight and my Mom's.

"You look beautiful, honey," she said. "Still hate your hair?"

I kissed her cheek. "Not any more," I confessed.

She gestured to her stool. "We still need to do something to it, so sit," she told me, picking up her comb and a bottle of hair gel.

We were on our way about an hour later. Daddy had given me my medicine in the pneumodermic gun, the kind that left me feeling a little woozy but *really* nice. Mom and I were talking about when I was a little girl. I didn't remember any of what she was saying, but it was like when she said it I suddenly remembered, like it was coming back to me just by hearing the words. Besides, why would I doubt it? Mom wouldn't lie to me. If she said something happened, then it happened.

I looked - and felt - great, with my long shiny blonde hair teased out and windblown-looking and my pink wraparound sunglasses on my nose. I was wearing a blue tank-top with spaghetti straps and the word "Spoiled" picked out across my budding breasts in rhinestones, skin-tight Daisy Duke denim shorts with a studded pale blue leather belt with a giant rhinestone Playboy bunny head for a buckle and white, scrunched-down Jessica Simpson cowboy boots with a two-inch wooden heel. Mom had it on the classic rock station and was letting me smoke in the car (as long as I kept the window down) as we chatted about what we were planning to do that day.

The red-and-blue lights in the rearview made my Mom swear, something that hardly ever happened. She reached down and undid a button on her blouse to expose more of her firm, tanned cleavage and leaned into me.

"Quick. Blow smoke in my eyes. Hurry!" she whispered.

I took a deep drag and blew a huge cloud of cigarette smoke into my Mom's face. She coughed and her eyes teared up. She blinked rapidly, making them redden and water more, and by the time the broad-shouldered officer walked up she looked as if she were crying for real.

"Drivers' license and registration, ma'am," the officer demanded.

She passed over the documentation, sniffing and breathing deeply in such a way as to make her magnificent bosom all but impossible to notice. Good thing the cop was wearing shades, or he might have given his slack-jawed stare away.

"Please, officer, I didn't mean to. If I get another ticket, my husband will kill me."

"You were doing forty-five in a thirty, ma'am," the officer explained.

"I promise, I'll slow down," she said, sticking out her bottom lip a little bit. To help, I popped my gum loudly and ran a fingernail along the top of my tank-top, biting my bottom lip. The officer *definitely* noticed.

"Ma'am, since there's nobody else on the street right now, I'm going to let you off with just a warning. Slow down." He passed over the *faux* ticket.

"Thank you, officer," Mom half-gushed. "Thank you so much. I promise to slow down."

The officer got back into his car and we watched him pull away before Mom started laughing out loud, wiping the last of the crocodile tears from her eyes.

"Mom, I can't believe you just did that," I said.

"Thanks for the back-up, you little Lolita," Mom said back. "And where's the harm? Josie, sweetie, a girl has to do what it takes to get what she wants. Remember that."

"I will," I said. Because if Mom said it, it had to be true.

We got to the DMV early enough, thank God, that the lines weren't horrendously long. I waited with the disinterested slouch that only a teenage girl can portray, tapping my birth certificate against my arm and waiting for my turn in the line.

The guy at the counter looked as bored as I was, and he took my application and my birth certificate and looked them over. His eyebrows rose.

"Uh, there's a problem here."

I gave him my most innocent, wide-eyed look. "What problem?"

"On your application, it says you were born April 17th, 1985 and on your birth certificate it says you were born April 17th, 1988. One says you're eighteen and the other says you're twenty-one."

"What's the difference?" I asked, all innocence and light.

"The difference is that one says you're underage and the other says you can drink."

"So?"

"So, you're asking me to print false identification. You could get in a lot of trouble."

"Only if you tell somebody," I told him, batting my long eyelashes.

"I could lose my job," he told me.

I bit my lip. "Look," I said. "Isn't there someplace we could go, a little more private than this, to talk about this? I mean, it's only three little bitty years."

"No way," he told me.

"C'mon," I urged. "You're bound to be due for a break. I *really* want to talk to you about this. In private. You can spare a couple minutes, right?"

I could see I'd hooked him. He put his "Next Window Please" sign on his booth and hustled down the counter. I waited at the door to the break room until he let me in. He was backed against the wall, looking at me like I was some kind of poisonous snake.

"Oh, don't be shy, baby," I teased him. "I just want to see what it will take to convince you to make that teensy little change on my application."

"Ma'am, it's my duty to warn you..." he began.

I was already on my knees and fiddling with his fly. "It's such a tiny little mistake to make, after all. Anybody could make it. You process so many applications in a day, you're bound to make

a tiny little mistake like that, right? I mean, you're only human and you
mmmmMMMMMMMMmmmmmm."

The rest of the sentence was lost around the swelling, throbbing mass in my mouth. Somehow I knew what I was doing, like I'd seen this done before somewhere. Whatever the reason for my knowledge of this act, the clerk seemed to really enjoy himself, leaning against the wall and moaning softly, threading his fingers in my hair.

"Watch the hair, baby," I purred to him. "I have to have my picture taken later and I don't want it all messed up."

"Don't stop," he told me.

"Don't stop? Why would I stop? Unless someone was to say that I was born in 1988, maybe. Then maybe I would be too upset to go on."

"Please..."

"It's an easy question, honey," I said, stroking his length just enough to keep him primed but not enough to get him off. *How the hell did I know how to do that? Was I a slut or something? How did I know so much about how to pleasure a dick?* "Was I born in '88 or in '85?"

"Oh, God," he moaned.

"'88 or '85?" I repeated.

"'85!" he grunted. "You were born in '85!"

I slipped his dick back into my waiting mouth. I felt so powerful, it was dizzying. I didn't even mind it when he put his hands around the back of my head and shot his load down my throat so hard that I choked a little. I could get used to power like this. And it was mine to take, too. After all, just like Mom said: a girl has to do what it takes to get what she wants.

"Con piangere e con lutto, spirito maladetto, ti rimani; ch'i' ti conosco, ancor sie lordo tutto."

With weeping and with wailing, thou spirit maledict, do thou remain; For thee I know, though thou art all defiled.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Inferno 08.036 - 039

Mom and I shopped all morning for new work clothes. I conned her into getting me some club clothes and a new bikini too, but mostly it was suits and slacks and blouses. The high point was Victoria's Secret and Frederick's of Hollywood for all the sexy, racy lingerie that went underneath it. Mom was totally serious about the 'dirty little secret' thing, apparently she'd been doing it herself for years and it kept her feeling young and sexy even when she was pregnant with me. It sounded like endless naughty fun to me, so I didn't argue at all. Other than it being a little weird at first having your mother tell you you'd look like a porn star or a centerfold in this or that garter belt or merry widow or corset, it was so much fun. I bet other girls were so jealous of me having a Mom so cool.

We had a quick lunch at the food court, nothing memorable, where we commented on the boys that walked by (and strangely enough I had quite a bit of an eye for the girls, which surprised me but I liked it) and waited for an opening at the manicure place. Mom just got her usual trim and polish and cuticle treatment, but I opted for a full set of acrylics and a solar

French-tip, because the long nails on the poster in the waiting room just looked so incredibly sexy that I *had* to have them. I stabbed and snagged myself an awful lot with the inch-long claws, but I made myself get used to them. They were just too sexy to be without. Mom laughed at me right at first, but she also gave me lots of helpful hints from the days when she wore her nails really long. I was used to them by the time we headed back to the car.

We drove a short way to the piercing salon, where I sat down to get my ears done. Mom wasn't a big fan of needles - she couldn't even watch Dad work half the time without getting queasy - so she sat in the front room and leafed through magazines while I was in the back. I was getting one in each lobe and one through the right cartilage. I slipped the girl who was piercing me a hundred in cash - the last of my cash until I started work - to do my belly button too, since my mom had already signed my release. I'd be so glad when I got my new 21-year-old drivers' license. I wouldn't need a parent's signature and I could get my tongue done and maybe another in each lobe. I'd already bought a ton of earrings at the stores in the mall, and I couldn't wait to wear the big silver hoops I'd bought. All the girls were wearing them and they looked great. I bet they'd look even better on me.

The piercings hurt, but the endorphin rush was worth it. I went loaded down with care instructions which I only half-heartedly paid attention to - I had my own ideas about when I was going to be wearing those big silver hoops. And any infection I got, anyway, Daddy would wipe it out with one of his super antibiotics or something he cooked up in his lab. It was like having my own personal Merck when I needed it. Sure, they'd both hit the roof if - more likely, when - they discovered the navel ring. But any teenage girl knows it's easier to get forgiveness than permission. I was just doing what any other red-blooded teenage girl would do.

We were on the way home, laughing and singing along to the radio, when I mentioned the last stop. I needed to hit a convenience store before we got home, just for some various sundries. I went into the Seven-Eleven, getting the once-over from some skate punk in the parking lot which made me wiggle my ass just a *little* bit more just to tease him, and snagged an *Elle*, a *Vogue* and a *Glamour* from the rack, a box of Tampax Pearls, a couple more disposable lighters (I was always losing them, and besides, these had bikini babes on them and I really *did* have a serious eye for the ladies, I discovered), another pack of gum and a Diet Pepsi. I walked to the counter.

"This it?" the clerk - who was kinda cute - asked.

"Carton of Virginia Slims filters," I said.

He looked at me as he placed the cigarettes on the counter. "You eighteen?"

"Twenty-one," I said. Soon I'd have the papers to prove it and I still had the cum taste on my tongue to say it was true.

"You convinced me," he said. I giggled.

"This might sound weird," he told me, "but do I know you? You look familiar."

I wrinkled my nose. "So do you, now that you mention it."

"Were you at Debbi Hanover's party last weekend? Or the big bust down on the beach?"

"I haven't partied in a while," I said. "I've been sick. In the hospital. I just got out."

"You don't look like you've been sick," he said, staring straight at my breasts as if they were some indicator of my general health.

"I totally was," I said. "I'm better now."

"I could swear I've seen you before," he went on, musing. "Your eyes or something."

"I don't live too far away," I told him. "My family comes here a lot."

"Maybe that's it, but I think I would've remembered somebody like you. I'm Eric."

"Josie," I said, smiling flirtatiously.

"I'm going to figure it out, Josie," he said. "I never forget a face."

"Well, look me up when you do," I said, paying with Mom's bank card and giving him a very promising and flirtatious over-the-shoulder look as I was walking away, my ass wiggling even more than before. This guy was *seriously* cute. "Maybe I'll see you around sometime."

"Not if I see you first," he said. "Pleasure, Josie."

"Likewise," I told him, just as the door closed behind me.

I couldn't stop laughing, even when I got in the car. I'd forgotten how much *fun* that was.

"Ahi quanto son diverse quelle foci da l'infernal! ché quivi per canti s'entra, e là giù per lamenti feroci."

Ah me! how different are these entrances from the Infernal! for with anthems here one enters, and below with wild laments.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Purgatorio 12.112-114

I fell into bed exhausted that evening. Mom had made a huge dinner to cap off the long day we'd had of shopping and housecleaning. She kept the place beyond immaculate as a matter of course, but when guests came over she went into complete obsessive-compulsive cleaning overdrive. Why my friends would care whether or not the over was clean was beyond me, but it didn't save me from an hour and a half on my hands and knees scrubbing. We cleaned baseboards and ceiling fans and weeded the garden, skimmed the pool and taken Formula 409 to all the chaise lounges. It didn't matter to me, though. I enjoyed spending the time with my Mom. Daddy was up in his lab all day, which was usual, but he came down to help out with some of the big stuff, like bagging up all the leaves I raked up and hauling them to the curb.

I got up early the next day and boosted \$50 from my mother's purse - I'd pay her back once I started work - and took my car to the tanning salon so that I could lay a nice base tan down before the party. I took some time and just drove around, trying to acquaint myself with the hangouts Mom said I liked so much. I didn't remember them at all, but my folks said they were my favorites, like Paradox and Inferno and 3-0-5, all the downtown dance clubs where I hung out and the coffee bar on Pascoe, the bowling alley on 32nd Street and the Icehouse on Strauss. They all looked fun and pleasant, with a constant gaggle of good-looking people having fun. All the sorts of places a girl like me would frequent. I just wish I actually remembered going there, what they looked like inside. I didn't even know what kinds of drinks I ordered or what kind of music I danced to. There was so much left blank.

I guess the rhythm of smoking and driving, smoking and driving lulled me, because my little black-and-gold Movado told me that I'd spent two hours out there and was late for my friends coming over. I slapped the car into high gear and hauled ass back home, pulling into the garage in a spray of gravel. Several other cars - a Jeep Wrangler, a Dodge Neon and a cute red Chrysler Crossfire - were parked along the curb. I half ran inside.

Mom and Dad were circulating around a group of four girls who were sitting very still and staring rather blankly into space. They were all dressed like I was - cute and *very* sexy - and looked to be about my age. Daddy had his pneumodermic gun in his hand and all of the girls had purplish marks on their necks, a telltale sign of injection. Why would he have been giving them my medicine? Was I still contagious?

Mom was talking to them in a low voice. "She's still alive. The wreck was only a fender-bender. Josie has always been alive."

I backed up a few steps before going forward, to make it look like I hadn't broken stride to listen to what they were saying and spy on them. Something was very not right, but I decided to wait until I saw more before I said anything.

"Hi," I said cheerfully, swinging my little purse.

"Hi, honey," Mom said, a little startled. "Your friends are here. You remember them, they were your best friends in high school. You were all cheerleaders together."

She pointed to a luscious blonde about my height with a very mature rack and identified her as Amber Cullen. A tawny-skinned black girl with lustrous red-black hair and the most kissable lips I'd ever seen was Ashlea Hodges, a short and curvy sable brunette with freckles and a butt tight as a snare drum was Kaci Keller, and the tall pale-skinned redhead with the chocolate brown eyes with the oh-so-naughty gleam in them was Melodee Hatcher. Mom said I'd known them since I was a little girl, that we'd all been in gymnastics together when we were seven. There were the same superficial memories there that had always been, but also the sense that they weren't *real* memories somehow, that they were given to me but I hadn't really formed them myself.

"Girls, you remember Josie," Mom said.

"Hey bitch," Melodee said, standing up to give me a tight hug. "What's up?"

"You know," I said glibly. "Y'all want to go swimming?"

"I didn't bring my suit," Ashlea said, pouting a little. I guessed that she got a lot of things just given to her with that pout. It made me want to bite her bottom lip.

"I can hook you up," I said.

"Thanks for having us, Mrs. Cunningham," Amber said to my mom.

"No problem, you girls are always welcome here, you know that."

"We're gonna be by the pool, Mom," I said, leading my friends upstairs. We talked about what teenage girls talk about - clothes and shoes and who's cute and who's skanky. It was very easy, and very comfortable, but I still didn't really feel like I belonged.

We changed into bikinis in the middle of my room. I knew I liked girls, but standing in a room with all of us naked, our firm young bodies exposed to one another, made me extremely

wet. Almost uncomfortably so. I spent a little more time than was absolutely necessary settling the rio-cut bikini bottom against my crotch.

I started grabbing up the poolside necessities - cellphone, suntan lotion, sunglasses, cigarettes and lighter.

"Hey, Jose," Amber interjected as she looked over what I'd grabbed. "Is this a party or what? Are you holding out on us?"

It took me a moment, but I clued in and grabbed the cocaine and ecstasy from my backpack. Melodee went to the little jewelry box on my bookshelf and opened it, exposing the little music-box ballerina that twirled a little bit sadly as my girlfriend recovered the dimebag of weed and the pinch-hitter pipe from inside.

"Damn, my girl is *always* holding," she said, closing the box.

"How did you know it was there?" I asked.

"Bitch, you been stashing your weed in the same place since we were twelve," Ashlea told me.

"Hurry up, we're losing the good sun," Kaci said, grabbing a towel. I shoved the drugs into a little beach bag and headed downstairs behind the trail of lovely young women who were obviously my best friends. They knew where I stashed my pot. Only friends would know stuff like that. And besides, Mom said I'd known them my whole life. Why would I ever doubt something like that? Whatever the hell I got sick with must've really knocked me out. *I hope I don't have brain damage or something*, I thought, but then I smiled. *But as long as I can suck a cock like I did yesterday, I guess I don't have to be all there in the brain department.* I thought about the cute guy in the Seven-Eleven and grinned. After all, skills deteriorated quickly if not practiced.

We nestled by the pool and greased up with all manner of suntan products, drawing our hair back and unlacing our tops to get the maximum exposure. Mom brought us some lemonade and a bottle of wine and scuttled - she was so cool that way - and we poured. I sipped wine, gossiped, and smoked a cigarette while Melodee rolled a joint. I told my girls about blowing the guy at the DMV for a twenty-one on my drivers' license. They all applauded me. Straight as little arrows, law and order all the way, my friends. They seemed a little put out that they hadn't thought of that first. As a matter of fact, they seemed to me more interested in the size of his dick than in the fact that I compromised my virtue to get I.D. that showed me legal to drink.

If these were my friends, and that was their reaction - it sounds like the five of us have been doing shit like this for a long time. I idly wondered when I'd lost my virginity.

"Oh please, bitch, you gave up the pussy three months before any of us did when you were thirteen," Kaci told me. "You were the one that told us all what it was like and were all like, 'you should totally do it too.'"

"The pussy pioneer," a very stoned Melodee said, passing me the doobie and dissolving in a fit of giggles. I toked and passed it along.

These were my friends? Drugs and sex and alcohol from thirteen on? And I was the ringleader? Somehow I thought I would have been different than that. More dignified or something, I don't know. But I guess I wasn't. Here was my proof.

Something inside me clicked. I couldn't fight the evidence. I was a party girl, a little coke head and an easy fuck. I sucked a guy's dick for a fake I.D. I couldn't argue my way out of it - that was *exactly* the kind of girl I was. Whatever it was in my head just accepted it and stopped fighting.

"So there's this guy at the Seven-Eleven," I said.

"Seven-Eleven? Shit, that's way too low-income for you, baby," Amber told me.

I looked at her askance. "Bitch, I'm not talking about marrying him. I just want to ride his cock and then cut him loose."

"Should we go check him out later?" Ashlea asked.

"Totally," Melodee said.

"Just remember, I saw him first," I said. "You bitches can have sloppy seconds."

The rest of the day was a blur of booze and drugs and gossip. We talked about colleges and where we wanted to go, we swam a little and had lunch with my Mom. The party finally broke up around three o'clock in the afternoon, when Amber, Kaci and Ashlea had to leave: Amber for a massage appointment, Kaci to go shopping with her divorced mother and Ashlea to meet the guy she was seeing. I bid them a goodbye with a promise of meeting later at Tempest, the hip new nightclub that had opened two weeks ago, at around ten.

I lounged in the pool with Melodee, loving the feel of the water against my skin along with the ecstasy I'd just taken driving up the gain on all my senses. I looked over at Melodee and resolved to make my move before I peaked.

"What do you want to do now?" I asked her.

She had the cat-in-the-sunbeam look of a woman who was both supremely high and supremely turned on. She smiled an out-of-it grin with eyes half-closed.

"I don't care, dude," she said. "I'm so fucking wasted right now, I can't decide."

I glided across the water the four feet to be next to her. She smelled really good. "I have an idea," I said. "Want to hear it?"

"Sure," she mumbled, rubbing her arms.

I leaned close, brushed a tendril of red hair out of her big brown eyes, and just barely brushed my lips with hers. She moaned, breathily, and pulled back in slow-motion.

"What the hell, bitch?" she asked me.

"Like you've never thought about it before," I told her. "Shit, you bitches are so wild you've probably done it."

"Not me," she said.

"Well, let's be the first, then," I said. "We're both fucked up, we can't be held responsible for our actions, and I've been looking at you in your little bikini all day and dreaming about what your pussy tastes like. So what's the big deal?"

"You've been dreaming about that? All day?" she asked me, confused.

"Baby, I've been dreaming about it for years. It's just seeing you in that little thing, strutting around my pool - shit, I just can't keep my hands off you."

"Josie, I don't know..."

My hands were roaming her flat stomach and starting to drift north towards her mouth-watering pale tits. Her eyes were rolling back as I slid the inside of my thigh along the top of hers and I was gently nibbling her long neck. My porn-star long nails barely grazed her erecting nipples through the fabric of her bikini top and she gasped.

"If you don't like it, then tell me to stop and I will," I whispered.

"Does this mean we're dykes?" she said, leaning back to give me easier access to her neck. My hands went under the fabric of her swimsuit and began to tease the nipples underneath. Melodee's breath caught in her throat.

"For this afternoon, it does," I said. "Do you really have a problem with that?"

She kissed me, hard. "Not right now I don't." Another kiss, and her pink tongue darted between my teeth and teased me. Her fingers closed behind my head and pulled my hair a little, rough but gentle in the perfect way to drive me wild. It felt like someone had stoked a bonfire between my legs.

Somehow, I managed to push my way through the haze to realize what I'd done, as Melodee sucked and bit my nipples as I ground my crotch against the top of her thigh underwater. I'd been struck by her beauty and seductiveness the second I'd seen her today. I'd wanted her from the first second - I knew that. I tried not to admit it, to distract myself with the same thoughts about Kaci and Amber and Ashlea, but there was something about *this* girl that drew me in. I'd made up my mind to have her early on and everything I'd done that day was designed to get her. The wine and the pot, the little touches and caresses that no one else noticed as I walked by her, the way I always kissed and hugged her when we talked, getting her too high to drive home when the others broke up the party so we could be alone together, the ecstasy.

I'd spent all day seducing this girl. She never stood a chance.

A girl has to do what it takes to get what she wants.

We lay on a towel beside the pool, naked and glistening and tangled together. I was propped on one elbow, looking down at her beautiful porcelain face, tracing little circles in the water droplets clinging to her chest with my long, white-tipped nails.

"Are we dykes?" Melodee asked.

"Don't be so paranoid," I told her. "You like dick, don't you?"

She nodded. "Yeah, I do."

"Did you like what we just did?"

She smiled shyly and lowered her eyes, biting her bottom lip and giving a tiny little nod.

"So we're probably bi," I told her. "Look, what the fuck does it matter? It felt good. Nobody got hurt. We made each other really happy and had a lot of fun. Why do we have to make it something other than that?"

She blushed. It was adorable. "'Cause I want to do it some more."

"Yeah?" I asked.

"Yeah. A lot," she said, touching my cheek. "I've never felt that way with a guy."

"You're not supposed to, baby," I explained. "That's what makes it special."

"So, you want to? Do it again, I mean."

"Of course I do," I said. "I've had a hard-on for you forever, bitch."

"So, what does this mean. We're, like, girlfriends or something?"

"If you want," I said. "I kinda like how that sounds. 'I've got a girlfriend.' 'Melodee is my girlfriend.' It sounds really cool. But we don't have to go telling everybody that. I mean, look - if I see a cute guy and the moment's right, I'm gonna nail him. So are you. That's just how we are, right? If we get weird about that then we're never gonna talk to each other again after a while. I'm not hot on being a couple of jealous bitches always wondering who the other one is fucking."

"Me neither," Melodee said, smiling with relief.

"So why don't we just call it 'fuck-buddies?' We do our own thing, but we fuck each other. I can live with that."

"So, what, we just call each other up and say 'I wanna fuck you?'" Melodee asked.

"I don't see why not," I told her.

"Cool," she said. "But I think I'm gonna use 'girlfriend,' too. I like the way it sounded when you said it. I want you to be my girlfriend."

"Cool," I said. "Want to try it out?"

"Try what out?"

"Our new system. Pretend I'm calling you on the phone."

"Okay," she said.

"Hey, Melodee, it's Josie. I wanna fuck you."

We kissed, and the world kind of faded away.

Ω



SUMMARY: Looking for cheap rent, a young guy ends up at the home of a couple who have recently lost their daughter, little does he know they have plans for him to replace her.

NESSUN MAGGIOR DOLORE

Part Five

by Valerie Hope

"Nel ventre tuo si raccese l'amore, per lo cui caldo ne l'eterna pace così è germinato questo fiore."

Within thy womb rekindled was the love, by heat of which in the eternal peace after such wise this flower has germinated.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Paradiso 33.007-33.009

I HAD TO ADMIT, THERE was something utterly delicious about the taste of an older man's cum mixed with the taste of a cigarette. Strangely enough, it was almost like chocolate or champagne, something with an emotional element to the flavor. I sucked on my Virginia Slims in the little arbor in front of Dr. Eagin's clinic, looking scandalously hot in my tailored-tight pink blazer, white silk blouse and pink mini-skirt with the smoky grey stockings and my pink and white Ferragamo wingtips with the four-inch heels. Particularly with the admirable 36DD tent in the front of the suit now, compliments of Dr. Eagin, the man whose cock I had just sucked and whose cum I had just swallowed. Just like I'd done every day for a month now. Gorgeous fake boobs like mine didn't come cheaply. Ever since I'd recovered from the surgery and the swelling had gone down, I'd been his little office suck-slave in addition to filing and scheduling and answering phones. It wasn't like it was any huge chore - Dr. Eagin was really sweet to me and brought me flowers and wine, and he had a really nice dick. But every time I looked down at my perfectly formed spherical new jugs, every time I got another look of lust from some passerby on the street, I was reminded how worth it it was, and I didn't mind all the free cocksucking. I was even tempted to fuck him, but that might go a little far. A blowjob was one thing, but this was a friend of Daddy's and if he tapped the pussy there might be consequences that nobody wanted. No, sucking was plenty, and Dr. Eagin didn't seem to have any complaints.

I caressed my new boobs covetously. I'd never been so happy about myself. And Melodee's hands were almost magnetically attracted to them. She'd sucked my nipples through my shirt for an hour while we were out at Paradox dancing last night. Anything that fired up my little redhead sex-bomb like that was worth any number of blowjobs.

A girl has to do what it takes to get what she wants.

I tossed my butt and went back in, spraying a little Listerine spray in my mouth to kill the smoke smell. Some of the Doc's patients were really snooty and they could kick up a fuss about the dumbest damn things sometimes. It was a slow afternoon, so I ducked into the

bathroom and did a tiny little toot of blow to perk me up, tossing back my head to get all of the drip down the back of my throat. The familiar buzz hit me and I went back out.

I liked slow afternoons, because if Dr. Eagin sent his nurses home early then I could use pet names for him. Anybody whose cock I sucked, I liked to be able to at least call them 'baby' afterwards. And I got to grab his ass. He had a great ass for a man in his fifties. He must spend hours on the treadmill to keep it so rock-hard. I really would like to see him naked. I wonder when his birthday is? Maybe if me and Melodee surprised him...

"Did you hear me? Josie?" Doc said.

"Sorry," I said, wiping my nose with a Kleenex. "I was kinda zoned out there, baby."

"I asked if you could get me Mrs. Cumberland's file. She's my eight o'clock tomorrow, isn't she?"

I checked the computer. "Yep," I said. "Be one second."

I walked into the file room, with a sexy slink in my walk that I put there just for the Doc. I knew he wanted me - I could feel his eyes on my body as I moved. I loved it. Making men want me was such a power trip, I couldn't get enough. I slid the moving shelves out of the way to get access to the C's and paged through the files. Cukiemann, Cullen, Culpepper, Cumberland. There she was. I pulled the file and some others came out, spilling on the floor. Damn. Too bad the Doc wasn't here. He loved it when I dropped things, because he got the fun of watching me bend over to get them. He had a thing for butts. Maybe if I let him fuck me in the ass?

I stopped. One of the files on the floor was Cunningham, Josephine N. My file. I looked around to see that nobody was looking, and slipped it under my blazer. I returned the other files to their places and dropped Ms. Cumberland's file on the Doc's desk. Then I sneaked my file into my pink backpack and zipped it closed. No time to read it here.

"Big plans tonight?" Doc asked me, coming out of the men's room. I jumped.

"You scared me."

"Sorry. I said, any big plans for tonight?"

The usual. Dancing till dawn, flirting and drinking and possibly hooking up. Usually winding up in my room with my tongue in Melodee's crotch. But I was starting to show the signs of burnout. Cocaine and X would only take a girl so far before she needed a night in.

"Nope," I told him. "Probably going to stay in, rent some movies or something."

"A beautiful girl like you should be going out," he told me.

"I go out every night," I replied. "Even a hot little number like me has to sleep sometime, baby. Else, where am I going to find the energy for that gigantic cock of yours?"

He always jumped and looked around for somebody who might hear whenever I mentioned his cock. He was so funny. It's not like I wasn't legal. But, then again, I was an employee and he was married. But I was careful, I only talked that way when nobody else was around.

"You really should be more careful," he cautioned.

I grabbed his semi-erect cock through his trousers, loving the tent it made in the fabric as I ran my long-nailed fingers around it.

"You like it that I'm wild," I purred, stroking him. "You're so into almost getting caught, having to trust a fucking girl to keep your nasty little secret. Admit it."

He sighed, a mixture of lust and sadness. "I hate what you do to me sometimes."

I tapped a nail against the head of his now fully-erect penis. "Why, Doctor... did I do all that, or do I need to send a thank-you letter to GlaxoSmithKline?"

He blushed. "I've switched pills. This is the new 36-hour kind."

"Thirty-six hours?" I said, sinking to my knees. "I better get started, then."

"...rispondi a me che 'n sete e 'n foco ardo."

Answer me, who in thirst and fire am burning.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Purgatorio 26.018

The downside of being a social hub was that the phone never stopped ringing. I spent about thirty dollars a month downloading new ringtones because the old ones tended to start to piss me off in a few short weeks. I sat at the little downtown café over espresso and cigarettes, having waved off Kaci and Amber and Ashlea and even Melodee (that one hurt - that girl drove me absolutely wild and I couldn't get enough of her) for invitations to go and do this or that and such-and-such a place. All I needed was a little time to myself, just going through my medical file. I could get in a lot of trouble - more trouble than I could fuck my way out of - for taking it out of the office, so I wanted to read it in relative peace. I don't know why. Some weird amorphous tickle in the back of my head telling me there was something important in there to be seen added to the sexual thrill of doing something dangerous that might get me busted.

I chuckled. My last big sexual thrill *did* get me busted. *Big* busted, 36DD. I lit another cigarette, told the waiter with the cute butt that I didn't want anything else, and opened the file. Josephine Nicole Cunningham, age twenty-one, height five foot four, weight one hundred and eleven pounds pre-op. Last menstrual period three weeks prior, no known drug allergies, takes only albuterol as needed for asthma, blah blah blah. The next page was all blood labs. Type AB positive, red blood cell count - *yawn*. The next was just measurements and doctors' orders for the procedure - 800cc implants under the muscle in the left and right breasts, and so on and so forth. I flipped pages a little angrily, sucking on my cigarette in disgust even though I knew I was ruining my lipstick. I went to all that trouble, all the risk of getting caught, for *this*? This was boring.

Or so I thought until I got to the typewritten page after my anesthesia report and my liability and malpractice waiver. Medical history, of procedures already done.

"Long-term retroviral therapy for gene splicing?" I asked aloud. "Extensive cerebellar reprogramming through proprietary external muscle stimulation and feedback? What the fuck does all *that* shit mean?"

I flipped through in haste, barely scanning the reports. *Experimental metabolic modification through genetic manipulation of surface proteins has yielded potential results of an anti-agapic. Skin and muscle cells on biopsy have indicated renewal consistent with pubescence*

and no cellular degradation is visible from repeated forced mitosis. I wasn't sure if I knew what the fuck that meant at all. All I did know was that it was all signed by Dr. David Cunningham.

Daddy did all this to me? He's been experimenting on me like a lab rat? Impossible.

I had to know what all this meant. I couldn't go to Daddy for it - if he *was* involved then he'd done a hell of a job already in covering it up and probably wouldn't give me a straight answer, not even counting the fact that even Daddy's straight answers frequently took a Ph.D. to understand anyway, and I was miles away from that. As a matter of fact, Mom had said that I'd always been pretty much a bubblehead my whole life, and if she said it I believed it.

Which was also weird. Why did I believe Mom so easily? Why did I trust her so much? I'd talked to Kaci and Melodee and the other girls, and their parents bullshitted them all the time. All the articles and television I'd seen led me to believe that "normal" parents told their children lies constantly. Where the hell else did Santa Claus come from? So why not mine? Were they different, or was I just a gullible little dipshit that believed every word that came out of her parents' mouths as if it were gospel?

I sat back, coffee and cigarette forgotten. My mind was whirling and my giant boobs were heaving up and down in my fight for breath. I had to have some answers, that much was certain. I knew just how to get them.

I paid my tab in cash, gathered up my things and took off in my car, revving up through all six gears as I headed for the stores to get what I needed. My 'shopping gene' was hard to ignore, even in my agitation, so in addition to the items I needed for my disguise I wound up with a delicious pair of Prada sandals and my third Louis Vuitton handbag and a gorgeous Donna Karan red cocktail dress that was calling my name from the window. Then I went over to the Seven-Eleven to see Eric. He'd never really pieced together why I looked familiar, but we were long since past that since I'd been dropping in about every two weeks to have him fuck me doggie-style in the freezer. He was pretty much a miserable lay - he popped way too fast and never really cared if I had fun or not, but he had a nice cock that hit some nice spots inside and he had a lot of enthusiasm for the job. I think Amber was doing him, too, so I'm sure he felt like a sex god among his loser friends, with two gorgeous girls fucking him and not calling him afterwards. But this time wasn't just because I was horny or even because it was a thrill that he cheated on one of my best friends with me. This time I actually needed his help.

He grunted and spasmed and collapsed against my back. I fought down frustration. He'd actually gotten me close to cumming that time, for once, and then went and shot his load before I could get mine. But that couldn't matter right now, and I could always have fun with my shower massager later. I kissed him over my shoulder and kneaded the muscles in his neck, acting like he'd been the best sex of my life. *And the award for Best Actress in a nooner goes to...*

"Mmm, baby, that was great," I told him.

"Yeah," he panted. "I love it when you show up."

I started gathering up my clothes. I'd kept my bra on, since he was a little rough with the new tits and they were still a bit tender for pawing. "I needed that," I told him.

"Needed it? What's up?" he asked.

"I've been really stressed out," I said.

"How come?" he asked me.

I waved it off like it was no big deal. "There's this guy at work. Old guy. He's been really creeping me out, following me around. I didn't do nothing about it but now I think I saw him yesterday following me home."

He got protective. Funny how a trip up my velvet tunnel made guys think they owned me. Guys were so fucking predictable. That's what I loved about them. "Do I need to do something about this guy?"

"Do what?" I asked, every inch the ingénue.

"Kick the shit out of him," he explained.

I stopped buttoning my blouse long enough to caress his cheek. "That's really sweet, baby, but what good would it do? You have to work and shit, and you can't be with me every second of every day. I have to protect myself."

"Can I at least help?" he asked, desperate to prove his manhood.

Gotcha, I thought. My eyes were wide with innocence. "D'you know where I can buy a gun?" I asked as if it had just occurred to me.

I ran upstairs quickly, before Mom spotted me, the minute I got home. I was undressed and in the shower by the time she knocked on my door.

"Honey? Is everything all right?" she asked.

"Can't talk," I said, my voice chirpy with *faux* excitement. "Doug finally asked me out! After six weeks of flirting he finally said yes! Shit, I don't know what the hell I'm going to wear!"

"Oh, honey, that's great!" Mom said. She had no idea who Doug was, because I'd just made him up, but she wanted to be cool about the whole thing. "Where are you going?"

I gave it just the right length of embarrassed, awkward pause. "Um... I sort of said I'd cook for him. Is that okay?"

"You're bringing him here?" Mom asked.

"I'm sorry! I couldn't think of anything else! He was looking at me with those big blue eyes and everything just went straight out of my head!" I said, frantic. "Please say it's okay! Please? You and Daddy can go out to eat, go to a movie, I'll pay for it. Just please, Mom, let me have the house to myself for the evening?" I put just the right amount of little-girl whine in the last question.

She appeared to be considering, but I knew I had her. "I'm not sure I like you having boys over with one of us here," she said sternly. "But, since you like him so much..."

I jumped and squealed, clapping my hands. "Oh my gawd, Mom, you're the best! Thank you so much! I promise I'll clean the whole place up, and we won't do anything. I have the coolest Mom in the world! Thank you!"

She seemed more than satisfied with her election as World's Coolest Mom and went back downstairs. I finished the shower - I might as well, even though I was clean I had to run the con until they'd left - and started pawing through my closet wildly.

Mom and Dad came up a little later, as I was holding up dresses to my body and pitching them into the discard pile.

"Wear the burgundy velvet," Mom told me. "It makes your eyes pop. I took some chicken out of the freezer to thaw, I didn't know what you were going to cook. The number for Chinese delivery is on the fridge if you mess up. Honey, we're off. We're going to dinner and a movie and we'll be back by eleven thirty. Eleven thirty *sharp*, got it?"

I smiled. Mom *was* pretty cool, considering, telling me that I needed to have all my clothes back on by eleven thirty and not making it a big issue. Dad was his usual clueless self. I scampered up to them and gave big hugs and kisses, making more promises and telling them how great they were.

After an interminable period of stalling, they left. I smoked a cigarette in my bathrobe on the front porch to make sure they weren't coming back for the 'oops, I forgot my purse' surprise inspection and then ducked back inside. I ran up to Mom and Dad's room and fished in the bureau for the spare key to Dad's lab. Then back to my room to unwrap the four gigabyte flash drive that I'd bought at Best Buy and let myself into the lab. I didn't know what the hell I was looking for, so I just downloaded the entire file library from Dad's main computer and pocketed the drive. I probably wouldn't have been able to make heads or tails of it anyway. At least Dad hid behind the complexity of his research and didn't bother with password protection or encryption in his own house. He probably would've forgotten all his passwords in a few hours anyway.

I locked everything up the way I'd found it - no one would ever suspect that I'd been there. I was pretty expert at sneaking around this house without being noticed anyway - I *was* a horny teenage girl and those skills were mandatory in my line of work.

I took a moment to open my purchases and put them on - the baggy sweater and khakis looked terrible on me, but then again they were supposed to. Unfortunately, a body and a rack like mine tended to get noticed - hell, getting noticed was why I *got* the body and the rack to start with - but they were difficult to play down. I managed as best I could with the baggy clothes and by hunching my shoulders a little bit. The one-size-too-large lab coat went over that and I said a brief apology to my feet before forcing them into the nondescript brown Hush Puppies I'd bought at Payless (I was so embarrassed) to complete the ensemble. Next were the fake dark-rimmed glasses with window-glass lenses and the frumpy, short brunette wig I'd bought. I left it purposefully messy, and it took all my resolve not to style it or add any makeup. I stood against my wall and took a quick snapshot of myself with my digital camera and printed it out on my computer. I pocketed the snapshot and some clear acetate sticky-back along with an X-acto knife and then wadded up all the garbage and packaging and receipts in the Payless bag and took them with me. I threw them away in a dumpster behind a nearby gas station and gunned the performance Nissan engine onto the freeway, smoking nervously as I made my way across town in the thinning drive-time traffic. It was only thirty minutes instead of the forty-five I'd budgeted to get to Applied Biotechnics Labs, over by the university campus. I pulled into the visitor lot and got several heavy binders out of my back seat. I walked towards the front of the building, not really having to pretend to be having trouble balancing the whole thing. I waited for several minutes for the right moment, waiting

for the door to start opening before I stepped up and collided with the person coming out the front.

"Oh, God, I'm sorry," the female lab tech said as my binders flew everywhere.

"It's okay, my fault," I muttered as I shifted to hands and knees and began gathering the binders. I hoped the tech didn't look too closely. They were full of blank typing paper and a few out-of-date fashion magazines.

"Let me help you," the tech said, but I'd beaten her to the punch. As I expected, she helped me up - never noticing me pull her security badge off of her coat - and she held the door for me as I balanced the tall stack of papers in both arms. I walked right past the security guard, who had only looked up for a moment and when he saw that there was yet another geek coming in hadn't stopped to question it. I'd banked on all the nerds in here looking alike.

I dropped the binders in an unoccupied office and sat quickly, trimming my picture with the X-acto knife and affixing it over the photo on the stolen I.D. Badge, then covered it with a fake name - Dr. Maggie Chase, a pediatrician in Dr. Eagin's building - that I'd printed out and then secured the whole thing with sticky-back, trimming it with the knife to make it look kosher. I clipped the I.D. onto my lab coat and stuffed the materials into the biohazard bag in the hall. Then I took my medical file and my flash drive down the hall, looking for a suitable sucker.

I'd bought the sweater I was wearing for two reasons. First, because it was bulky and hid my figure, but secondly because it had buttons and could expose cleavage. I was banking on the fact that some of the guys in here hadn't seen live tit in a very long time and a nice view of the living, breathing thing would grease the wheels of what I was planning just enough.

Dr. Matthew McCready was the perfect candidate. Pale from long hours spent away from the sun, skinny and awkward-looking and with the palpable sense of being fucking off-the-charts brilliant. I read his name-badge from around the corner and then hid, waiting to 'accidentally' bump into him as he finished his conversation with someone else and headed back to his office.

"Dr. McCready," I said, "just who I was looking for. Alice said you were down here."

It was a big place, and the good doctor didn't look in possession of much in the way of social skills, so anybody could have been Alice to him. He didn't think about it very long at all, he just nodded.

"Do you have some time to go over some research with me? Dr. Pulaski needs me up to speed on it and I'm afraid it's a little bit over my head."

He hesitated. "Um, I'm not sure I know..."

I pressed my breasts against his arm. He got his first really good look. I saw him cave.

"Please?" I asked. "They said you were the man to talk to."

"I guess I can spare a few minutes." He led me cavalierly to his office, exercising dusty manners of a gentleman that I'm sure he read in a book somewhere. They were too antiquated to be really his.

"Thank you so much, Doctor. You're really bailing me out, here."

"No problem, um..."

"Maggie. Maggie Chase. I'm in the new division upstairs."

He had no idea there was a new division upstairs. As a matter of fact, neither did I. But it sounded good and my tits were *very* convincing.

"That must be why I haven't seen you around," he mumbled, sitting behind his computer.

"I just started last week. This place is a madhouse. I don't know how I'm going to get ramped up in time," I said, with a rehearsed nervous giggle.

He smiled. It was a smile that made me consider actually fucking him, completely guileless and genuine in a way I didn't see among the slick players in the nightclub scene I was so used to. "You'll do fine. You're smart enough to get in the door, then you're smart enough to work here, that's what I tell all the new hires."

"That's so sweet," I told him honestly.

"Let's take a look at all this," he said, plugging in my flash drive. "Seems there's a lot of projects here. Which one in particular are you ramping up on?"

"The gene therapy," I told him, unsure. Just how many irons did Daddy have in the fire, anyway? I knew he was brilliant, but this was burying the needle.

"Okay, I see it," Dr. McCready said. He opened the first file of many. "Wow. This is all theoretical? It looks like a live test."

"That's just it. I'm not sure."

"Well, apparently, this retroviral therapy is splicing not just genes into an organism, but entire chromosomes," he said. "We played with this a while back, couldn't get it to work. But there's some kind of drug therapy used in conjunction that's making it stable."

"What's the end result?" I asked.

He pulled up a file, a picture of a bedraggled but marginally good-looking young man in his late twenties or early thirties named Jason Wicks. "I'm not really sure, but it seems as though this subject here - Wicks, his name is - tested positive for a certain protein marker during a routine test for bone marrow donation. That protein, in combination with suppression of the immune system, made him a perfect candidate for this therapy."

"What is the therapy designed to do?" I asked.

"Well, whatever. The sky's the limit. Anything you want to splice in, you can splice in, whether it's a third arm or eyes in the back of the head or an extra three feet of height. You'd have to have a genetic map for those things, of course, but if you have a pre-existing set of chromosomes, the subject will take them and start rebuilding itself to those specifications."

A crazy idea struck me. Something Melodee had said one night as we lay together after sex. *I was so messed up when you had your accident, she told me. I mean, I know you're okay and all, but I remember that I cried for days and days and wouldn't come out of my room. That seems pretty stupid, right, since you were okay?*

The car accident. Maddie and David scarcely ever talked about it. Was it more serious than I'd thought? Did something happen to me?

"Could you change the whole organism?" I asked.

"Probably not," Dr. McCready said. "Not like a human into a horse or something like that. All that biomass has to go somewhere, and I don't think any of the transition stages in a transformation like that would be able to sustain itself."

"What about a gender transformation?"

"Theoretically, that's possible. It would be very traumatic to the organism, though. It would suffer a long sickness as a result and would have to be very healthy to survive."

Jason Wicks. Josie Cunningham. A car accident that no one remembered or talked about. It was insane that I was even considering it.

"Thanks a lot, Doctor," I told him. "You've been a huge help."

"There's tons more here," he said. "All kinds of different things. Is there anything else you need help with?" He obviously didn't want to be parted from my tits right away.

"What kinds of things?"

"Well, let's see. There's a test run of a cerebellar reprogramming system here."

"What is that?" I asked.

"It's an external device that trains the muscles by electrical impulse and then feeds that information back into the movement centers of the hindbrain. Fascinating stuff. This report says that it was used to teach a bedridden patient how to walk again and then used the information it built up from there to instill about twelve years' worth of knowledge of dancing and martial arts. The tests are inconclusive, though. It doesn't really say how well it worked."

I thought about it. For somebody who'd been in bed for a long time, I certainly got lots of attention on the dance floor even though I'd only been told what an excellent dancer I was. And I did unconsciously change the way I stood when I felt threatened.

"Amazing that these movements can be trained with or without conscious control. I'd like to know more about this," he said.

"I'll keep you posted if I hear anything," I told him. "What else?"

"Well, here's a - oh my God."

"What?"

"This is a genetic modification project for an anti-agapic."

"What's that?"

"Fountain of youth," he said. "An anti-aging treatment. It says here that they've been able to re-code the genetics in an organism to have no cellular breakdown whatsoever during cell

division. Each new cell is a perfect copy with no generation loss or degradation from the previous."

"You mean the cells don't age?" I asked, looking over his shoulder.

"Not appreciably," Dr. McCready said, scanning the document. "I mean, the organism isn't protected from outside factors such as disease or trauma, but this seems to indicate that so long as nothing major happens to the organism, it will remain the same biological age as biological maturity. It says the subject is female, and females reach biological maturity at seventeen or eighteen years old. So she will remain seventeen or eighteen for the rest of her natural life, if this theory is correct. Absolutely amazing."

"Thanks, Dr. McCready," I told him, gathering up my things and putting the flash drive into my pocket. I reached across him to delete the local file.

"Wait! What are you doing?" he said as I shut down his computer. "There's more to read. This project has unbelievable opportunities. I don't know why I wasn't told about it."

I pushed the pneumodermic against his neck and pulled the trigger. He slumped, smiling the same silly smile that everybody did when the drug took effect.

"You weren't told about it because it doesn't exist," I told him. "It never did, and you never met me. If you're asked, you went right back to your office and then fell asleep."

"Of course I did," he told me.

I picked up my file and buttoned my sweater. "Nighty night, now, Doctor."

"Sì mi parlava un d'essi; e io mi fora già manifesto, s'io non fossi atteso ad altra novità ch'apparve allora."

Thus one of them addressed me, and I straight should have revealed myself, were I not bent on other novelty that then appeared.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Purgatorio 26.025-26.027

Options. I had them all, and I had none of them. I stared at the newspaper article on the Internet in front of me at the Starbucks where I'd wound up, shed of the frumpy unattractive wrapper I'd hidden in and once again the voluptuous, perpetually teenage sex bomb that I'd become.

Community Stunned by Death of High-School Girl. Josie Cunningham, eighteen years old, head cheerleader and class president and Phi Beta Kappa, loved by her schoolmates, killed in a head-on collision with a drunk driver nine months ago. There was even a quote in the article from Melodee.

Options. I had to think. What to do? I loved my parents, but they weren't my parents. They found me. I closed the first browser and looked at the second window, the other article. *Convenience Store Manager Vanishes, Police Baffled.* Jason Wicks, manager of the Fulton Avenue Seven-Eleven, disappeared after his shift, et cetera, et cetera.

They *found* me. Something in my blood, something that showed up when I'd gone to volunteer to donate bone marrow to the sick, and David had found it. A cheap apartment close to work. It had been a perfect bait for someone like Jason Wicks. I didn't even *know* Jason Wicks, I knew nothing about him, even though I was him and he was me. But he wasn't me. I wasn't

Jason Wicks, I was Josie Cunningham. I didn't manage a Seven-Eleven, I fucked the clerk there on my hands and knees in the walk-in freezer. I danced all night and drove a hot car and wore designer clothes.

Is this why I'd never felt quite right inside? It had to be. Mom and Dad. Maddie and David. They loved me so much, they were so good to me. How could they have done this, how could they have taken an innocent life and just uprooted it like that? When did Jason Wicks get a vote? Did he volunteer for this, did they pay him? And why didn't these people, who assured me over and over that I could always tell them the truth, why didn't they tell me? I was *dead*, for the love of Christ. I was a dead girl and here I was sitting in a coffee shop drinking latte and fishing in my purse for a cigarette.

I had to go home. I had to have more answers. Just one stop along the way.

"Dopo lunga tencione verranno al sangue...."

They, after long contention, will come to bloodshed....

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Inferno 06.065

Mom - Maddie - stood up from the couch as I walked in.

"Honey, where have you been? It's almost two, we were worried sick."

I just stared at her. My mom. This stranger.

"Honey? Josie? Are you all right?"

"Was he nice? Was he a good person?" I asked quietly.

"Was who a good person?" David asked.

"Jason Wicks."

Maddie's face fell. She began to shake her head *no, no, no* as her mouth moved in a vain attempt to make words. David took a step backwards, his face white.

"How could you?" I demanded. "How could you do that to someone?"

"You were gone," David said. "Honey, we..."

"Don't *honey* me. How could you?"

"We died with you. Your mother. I could bring you back, Josie. I knew how. All I needed was that protein in someone's blood. Anyone's. Just find that protein and I could have my little girl back."

"And all it cost was someone else's little boy," I accused.

"He was a loser!" Maddie screamed. "A waste! Wasting his life in a convenience store selling fucking Slurpees and paying the interest on a huge debt was all he was ever going to be! No one was going to miss him! No one! And we missed *you*, baby, so badly! We wanted you back! He wasn't too high a price to pay!"

"Haven't you been happy?" David pressed. "Haven't we given you a good life? You've made us happy, sweetheart, even when we thought we never would be again. Aren't you the least bit glad? Relieved that it was him and not you?"

"You completely erased this person from the world," I said.

"But we got our daughter back!" David said. "I don't regret a thing."

"I'm really sorry to hear that," I said, raising the gun.

"Pensa, lettore, se io mi sconfortai nel suon de le parole maladette, ché non credetti ritornarci mai."

Think, Reader, if I was discomfited at utterance of the accursed words; For never to return here I believed.

Dante, *La Divina Commedia*, Inferno 08.094 - 096

The investigation was quick, thankfully, and well coordinated. Thanks to Eric and some very judicious uses of David's memory drug, the police were all too quick to chalk this up to a random break-in. All the evidence pointed that way, anyway. I'd had Eric break in a window, trash the place and take a lot of valuables - at least the ones I didn't want - drive the seventy-five miles to the reservoir to toss the gun and then go home and promptly forget he'd ever known me. Same with the neighbors. The pneumodermic got a lot of use that night but nobody in the vicinity saw or heard a single thing.

I hid out at Melodee's apartment for about six months, laying low and staying as out of sight as a bombshell 36DD-25-35 blonde could. It was a great time for us, together - she was working as a waitress at Hooter's while waiting for auditions or a modeling gig and I'd used the pneumodermic to rid myself of Melodee's silly conviction that she was a lesbian. Our arrangement didn't change, we still fucked whoever we fancied at the time, but at least we could finally be honest about how we felt about each other, and live together as something other than roommates.

The will came out of probate without contest, executed by a law firm in the capitol, and everything was left to their loving daughter Josephine. The lawyers hadn't batted an eye when I showed up and introduced myself. After all, I looked just like the pictures in the Cunningham house (except a little more big-chested), my fingerprints matched those David had dutifully filed when I was a little girl for identification in case I was kidnapped, the DNA test showed I was definitely David and Madelyn Cunningham's offspring and even though there were rumors that I'd died in a car accident a year and a half ago, there was no death certificate for me anywhere (thanks to David) and records of me making purchases on a credit card and applying for a drivers' license well after the date of my 'supposed' death. With no one else really vying for the estate against me, the lawyers were content to dispose of the estate as per the will and leave the entire thing to me just to have it off their desks.

I didn't want the house. I kept my car and some of Maddie's better jewelry, and the entire contents of the lab, and everything from my room. I sold the rest. Everything except the patents, which passed to me. The patents that formed the cornerstone of my new business, set up with the funds from the sale of the Cunningham estate.

My heels *click-clacked* against the marble floor of my high-rise office as I puffed on a Cohiba cigar and lowered the boom on my CFO over my cell-phone. Our public offering was in a

matter of hours and he was still dragging his feet about the market projections. Once Nūvō Cosmetics released its line of age-stopping products, only a few weeks away from being cleared by the Food and Drug Administration, the stock should skyrocket as billions of women rushed to their high-end stores to be eighteen again. Early projections said I stood to be the wealthiest woman in the world in a matter of weeks, with a net worth well into the double-digit billions just from Revitalique alone. Not to mention all the residuals I was getting from the use of the Unit in physical therapy and the sale of the chromosome-splicing procedure from everywhere to burn wards to sex-reassignment clinics the world over. My investors had worried that the drugs and procedures wouldn't pass the FDA. They asked how I was so sure they'd work without negative side effects. A big part of me wished that I could tell them.

So here I was, looking out over the Manhattan skyline, puffing delightedly on a top-notch cigar and wondering where it was all going to stop. Surely, at some point, some reporter was going to get suspicious and investigate my death. I had pneumoderemics to spare to deal with that problem when I got to it, not to mention that I'd had new documentation made down to the birth certificate (amazing how good a fake I.D. one could get when one had a million dollar budget for it) that said that I was Josephine Nicolette Hastings (I was literally driving past the video- and bookstore of the same name when I thought of it), so it would take a dogged reporter indeed to make the connection. But they weren't in any big hurry to take me down. Connie Chung and Barbara Walters were already top of my pre-order list for Revitalique. I was a media darling - the cast-iron bitch in the boardroom whose best friend was still a waitress at Hooter's and who partied like Paris wherever she went. Even in her office she wore no less than six million in diamonds - Liz Taylor eat your heart out - and whose Upper West Side, three-thousand square-foot apartment was staffed by male models who were *definitely* not chosen for their punctuality. On the QT, my orgies were beginning to be the absolute toast of the A-List. And my discretion was legendary - a quick little zap from my pneumodermic and any tabloid reporter in the world would say there was no story to tell. I made more money with the drug I *didn't* release to the market from Daddy's lab than I did with the ones I did. Kind of symmetrical, and it appealed to me in a twisted way.

I tapped my teeth with my signature porn-star-length French manicure. Melodee was waiting for me tonight, in a bubble bath, and afterwards the public release party that had a guest list like *Us Weekly's* wet dream.

Sometimes I thought about a down-on-his-luck night manager named Jason. Sometimes I thought about a pair of distraught parents who crossed a line. Sometimes I even thought about a .38-caliber revolver lying on the bottom of a reservoir across the country. But mostly I thought about stacks of cash so high I'd need a forklift to move them and a sweet-ass little redhead with big fake tits that I'd bought her for her birthday, who knew *just* where to lick to make me scream and who would be young and firm and eighteen years old forever, just like I was.

Life was pretty good. Too bad it cost so much.

Ω