

SUMMARY: After getting dumped by his girlfriend, a casual wish made leads to changes and a new life complete with a boyfriend!

SONG FOR THE DUMPED

STORY AND
ILLUSTRATIONS
BY VALERIE HOPE



PART ONE

MY PALMS SWEATED A LITTLE as I waited for the somewhat arrogant sales clerk to unlock the display case and pull out the item I requested. He laid it unceremoniously on a black velvet pad and stepped away, leaving me to contemplate the vastness of my impending purchase.

On its merits, the ring wasn't much. A little ½-carat diamond surrounded by swirls of smaller diamonds in a gold setting. As jewelry went, it didn't even measure up. But what the ring *symbolized* – that was another matter entirely. Compared to the enormity of what the ring simply *meant*, well, the price-tag paled into inconsequentiality.

“Would you like to see another?” the smarmy clerk prompted with a priggish clearing of his throat. *Probably gay*, I thought bitterly. *He'll never know the pressure of buying one of these for a woman. How everything has to be perfect. One tiny little detail overlooked and it could mean a 'no.'*

“I think I'm good, actually,” I said, just wanting the ordeal finished and behind me. As it was, I could scarcely breathe. “This one.”

“You have excellent taste,” he said with a trace of a sneer in his voice which betrayed his lie. *He thinks it's tacky*, I thought. *Well, fuck him. He has that luxury.*

The little clerk with the pencil-thin moustache and the superiority complex busied himself placing the ring in a black velvet box and writing up a receipt. With shaking hands, I took the engagement ring to the counter with the handwritten sales slip and waited with a huge lump in my throat while the cashier cavalierly disencumbered me of quite a bit of my yearly income. But when he passed me the credit card receipt and I scribbled my illegible signature on the curling paper, the finality of what I'd done slammed down in my brain like the closing of a vault door. It was real, now. I had papers to prove it. Me, Jeff Cornwell, poster child for the lower middle class, would shortly no longer be able to refer to Madeline Thompson as a 'girlfriend.' Soon, I would have a fiancée. I would have to learn to care about flower arrangements and seating charts and pretend to see a difference in fabric swatches all the same shade of white. I swallowed hard.

The cashier – a cute little Asian girl with a button nose – gave me a toothy smile. “Congratulations,” she bubbled. “When are you going to pop the question?”

“Tomorrow night at dinner,” I croaked. “Her favorite restaurant. We had our first date there, two years ago tomorrow.”

“How romantic,” the girl effervesced.

“Glad you think so,” I said. “Now, if I can get *her* to think so.”

“Relax,” the cashier reassured me. “Sounds like you have all your bases covered.”

“Thanks,” I told her. “Now, I think I'm gonna head to that bar over there and have myself a drink. Or nine.”

She giggled and bid me a farewell I didn't even hear. I stuffed the ring into my jacket pocket and picked my way through traffic across the street to douse my newfound terror with a sizeable quantity of mid-range Scotch.

* * *

D-Day, H-Hour Minus Eight. I awoke as I customarily did, snapping on my bedside lamp and regretting it instantly, groaning and burying my abused eyes against the back of my arm while I groped on the bedside table for my cigarettes. I picked up the habit in my early teens and while the 'cool' factor wore off with most of my friends, it turned out that I was one of those lucky individuals who *truly* loved and enjoyed tobacco. I knew I would have to quit someday, but until that time I remained a dedicated smoker and let it be the first and last thing I did every day.

Truth be told, the morning cigarette stood as the only way I could face most days. No part of me could possibly be considered a morning person. I loathed the beginning of the day and usually went out of my way to avoid dealing with it. But this day – this day mattered. I had to get up and get going, despite my body's protests to roll over and go back to sleep. Preparations needed making. Arrangements needed finalizing. Everything needed to be perfect.



Maddie planned on meeting me at the little outdoor bistro where we met around two in the afternoon. Before that time I needed to make sure the restaurant manager knew to play our song on the outdoor speakers and to bring the champagne at just the right time. Her favorite flowers – dutch iris – waited for me at the florist and I wanted a reservation at the moderately upscale hotel just down the block from the restaurant in case her love for me overwhelmed her and she couldn't wait to get back to her apartment before having her way with me. It would be a welcome respite – Maddie's and my sex life had stagnated over the last few weeks and I hoped that trend would tick upwards once we had firm plans to be husband and wife. As a matter of fact, all my soul-searching and self-examination aside, I had a number of reasons for my upcoming proposal. I loved her, of course, and wanted to spend the rest of my life with her, and that remained the foremost reason. But she and I had been in a gradual descent as a couple lately – spending less and less time together and finding that once-inconsequential things now took priority over our relationship. We had even postponed moving in together three months prior for reasons which now completely escaped me. When we had decided to cohabitate, the decision seemed so logical and sensible. But we kept putting it off, waiting for leases to be up and for circumstances to idealize, and before long we

no longer even mentioned it. When my lease had expired, I mentioned it to Maddie and only received “it’s not the right time” as an answer.

All in all, Maddie and I settled into a state of semi-romantic numbness. A condition which I hoped to remedy.

Levering myself up from my bed with an effort, I ground out my lifeline cigarette in the bedside tray and rubbed the lingering crud from the corners of my eyes with the heels of my hands. On none-too-steady feet, I stumbled yawning into the bathroom and stepped into the shower just as the first rosy shreds of light limned the purple above the dark treeline outside my window.

The shower and shave served to wake me up enough to confidently make coffee and take me the rest of the way into total consciousness. As I dressed, I even found myself whistling. Once the shock of actually making the decision to propose to her faded, I found myself looking forward to it. Not the matrimony, but the actual act of proposing marriage. I possessed a singular romantic streak to my personality – which had gotten me no end of trouble in my life – that seldom expressed itself, buried behind years of jaded cynicism and simple priority. Add to that my choice of a shockingly practical-minded girlfriend and my opportunities to sweep Maddie off her feet and make big pink Charlie Brown hearts burst over her head while she smiled a sappy romantic smile dwindled away to nothingness. I relished the chance to really touch her heart today. It seemed a long, long time since I had.

My errands passed quickly, blissfully unencumbered by weekday traffic, and I dressed in a light blue polo shirt and khakis – she would suspect something if I showed up in a jacket and tie – which Maddie always said complimented my coloring. It was the nearest thing in my closet which I could consider Maddie’s favorite outfit. I spritzed myself with a light mist of her favorite cologne and took a moment to muss my hair into the careless little-boy shag I knew she favored. Tucking her flowers under my arm and checking at least fifty times to be sure the velvet box rested securely in my pocket, I walked out the door of my little apartment and climbed into my car.

* * *

Maddie showed up precisely on time – her trademark and her obsession – and found the table I had selected in the dappled light under a spreading spruce tree with no difficulty. I stood up and gave her a kiss on her warm, smooth cheek. A glass of her preferred chardonnay awaited her and

brought a sweet little smile to her lips. Her auburn hair ruffled gently in the cool afternoon breeze as she sat.

I couldn't dive straight into a conversation as I'd wished since the waiter pounced on her immediately, taking her order of a grilled chicken salad and hustling away before I could get a word out. She brought that out in the service industry. A very pretty girl always got better service, particularly on a slow day after the lunch rush. I contented myself to just take her hand and closely follow the soft, feminine curve of her jaw and the adorable spray of freckles across her nose, cheeks and upper chest.

We passed the requisite couple banter quickly – how was work, how is your sister, you look tired, did you get my email about the whatever. Her brisk, businesslike tone bespoke discomfort to me, which confused me a little, but I pushed it from my mind. Once the Question was asked and answered, everything would be different. We'd be a couple again. We'd be passionate again. We'd regain our shot at happiness and fulfillment.

“So, I have something I wanted to talk to you about,” I began clumsily, my rehearsed lines fleeing my head as the moment loomed in my mind, making my heart flutter like a bird in a cage.

“I have some news, too,” she said.

“Okay,” I said. “I guess – I mean, my thing might take a while,” I told her. “Maybe you should go first.”

She took my hands in her own and looked deeply at me. “Jeff, there's something I really need to tell you,” she said with a sigh, the words coming out in a rush like she had to overcome some resistance just to get them loose from her throat.

“Sure, babe, you can tell me anything,” I reassured her.



Oh my God, is she tearing up? I wondered as I saw her eyes start to glisten.

“God, I went over this and over this in my head, all day yesterday and all day today,” she moaned, more to herself than to me. “I thought I had it all planned out.”

“Had what planned out?”

“Jesus, Jeff, I’m so sorry,” she blurted. “I didn’t mean to... I mean, I wasn’t *planning*... but you and I were growing apart and it seemed like you just didn’t... and then we didn’t move in together, and I thought... shit. I don’t know what I thought. It all got away from me.”

“Maddie, you’re not making any sense,” I told her. “What’s going on?”

She could no longer meet my eyes, dropping them to the tabletop and a detailed study of her fingernails. “I met someone,” she said in a very small voice.

“Met someone... wait,” I stammered. “You mean, you *met* someone?”

She nodded, her chin dimpling as she fought tears. "It wasn't something I planned," she said. "I love you, Jeff. I *wanted* to move in together. I mean, I really wanted it. When we didn't, I guess I just sort of figured that was 'it,' you know? That you just weren't interested any more. So when I went to that conference last month, and I was on my own for a little while..."

"You met him there?" I said, completely numb from the shock. The lump in my pocket felt like it was growing hotter, burning me through the thin fabric of my khakis. "You slept with him?"

Her lack of answer deafened me. It made the birds stop singing in the trees.

I stared at her for a measureless time. "There's more," I stated flatly. "I can see in your face there's more. Go ahead. Just finish it."

She cleared her throat and sniffed loudly. "It had been so long since... since I *felt* like that, Jeff. You made me feel that way once, and it went away and I missed it so much. And then when Mi--"

"Don't say his name," I interrupted. "I can't hear his name, okay? Not from you."

She let out the breath which would have voiced the hated name in a long, trembling sigh instead. "When he... when we..."

"Just say it," I commanded hollowly.

"I fell in love with him," she told me. "I didn't mean to. I tried not to. But it just kept happening, no matter what I did. I couldn't stop it."

"Okay, then," I said, pulling my hands away as she reached for them. I struggled for something profound to say, some turn of phrase or metaphor which could convey what she'd done, but nothing materialized in my mind.

I took the little leather folder containing the check and tossed some cash inside, then dropped it carelessly onto the table. I took the flowers from their hiding place under the table and thrust them at her. "These are for you," I said. "I don't want them. I... we're all done here."

I backed away from the table, taking one last look at her, then started to turn.

"Jeff, wait," she pled.

"Wait for what?" I snapped. "You actually expect forgiveness?"

"I... I guess not," she said to the tabletop.

I turned and left without looking back.

* * *

"Hey, buddy," the bartender in the middle of my swimming vision said to me. "How are you planning to get home?"

"I... I'm gonna sleep here," I slurred. "Like, in the alley or something."

"The hell you are," he said. "Lemme call you a cab, okay? We're about to close."

"No, not a cab," I told him. "I can't afford a cab. I just spend all my money on a fucking engagement ring. I'm broke. And it turns out she's with some other guy. She tells me at the date when I'm gonna ask her to marry me. How fucked up is that?"

"About as fucked up as the last three times you told me that story," the bartender said. "You got a friend or something you can call?"

"A friend? Yeah, I got a friend. His name is Will."

"That's good," the bartender told me. "Why don't you call Will?"

"Yeah," I said. "He'll know what to do."

I finally dialed his number on my smartphone on my sixth or seventh try. He answered quickly and the sounds of his job – tending bar, at a club across town – thundered in my earpiece.

"Hey, Will, it's Jeff," I slurred.

"You sound wasted, dude," he told me.

"Yeah, I'm pretty fucked up," I replied. "I need somebody to take me home and I don't have any money for a cab. Can you pick me up?"

"Sure, man, no problem. I get off in about another twenty minutes. Can you just hang out and wait for me? Drink some water or something. Go puke in the bathroom. Whatever."

"Sure, Will. You're a really good friend, didja know that?"

"Yeah, I get that a lot."

I managed to slobber out the location of the bar where I sat nestled among my empties and hang up. I levered myself up unsteadily and lurched towards the door.

“Where ya going?” the bartender asked me.

“Gotta get some air,” I told him. “Will's coming to get me.”

“Good, man, good,” he said. “Hey, listen – I am really sorry. About what happened.”

“Yeah,” I said. “Me, too.”

The cool night air didn't serve to refresh me as I had imagined it would. It only made me aware of the pounding in my head and the barely-covered heartache which I would risk anything to avoid dealing with at that moment. Combing through my pockets for the sad remains of my cash, I found just enough to stumble into a liquor store one street over and buy a quart of rotgut whiskey in a paper sack. I slugged from it forlornly as I teetered back the way I'd come, back towards the spruce tree which had witnessed my utter destruction earlier that day.

The quiet babble of the fountain next to the little outdoor bistro lured me and I flopped bonelessly onto the low coping around the glimmering caustic light of the water. Several bright discs lined the well-lit bottom of the basin, coins which lurched madly this way and that in the shifting parallax of the moving water. *Make a wish*, the small brass placard bade me. I snorted derisively in that slack-jawed, drunken way.

“Wish?” I growled at the offending fountain. “I got a wish for you, you asshole. I wish I could've been the one to dump her. She thinks she's so good. Little Miss Perfect. Would it kill you to do your hair or wear some makeup? Paint your nails or something? Look like a girl for a change? Shit, you won't even wear a dress unless somebody dies. You probably would've showed up at our wedding in pants. Yeah. Shit. That's what I wish. I wish I was the one doing the dumping.”

I dug in my pocket for a coin, remembering with a start that I'd spent my very last dime on the cheap, malodorous liquor in my hand. Only one thing remained in my pocket, something I still inexplicably had on my person, even though it symbolized everything that had gone wrong in my life.



With a soft ululating chime, I flipped the engagement ring into the water. It landed with a soft *plunk* and disappeared among the piles of pennies and nickels on the bottom.

“That oughta be worth a fucking wish,” I grumbled, then belched, then vomited noisily on the curb. I pushed myself back up to a seated position, wiping my chin with the back of my hand, and collapsed against the thankfully cool granite of the fountain, regretting my decision to toss the ring but too drunk and unsteady to try and fish it out. Tomorrow. I’d sober up and get the ring tomorrow, then take it back to the store and face the ignominy of returning it to the smarmy little sales clerk and suffering his knowing superior glances and smug bearing. For now, let it just guarantee the wish.

It was a good wish.

* * *

I don't know how long I sat there, breathing heavily through my mouth and rubbing alcohol-scented flop sweat from my neck and brow, before Will finally showed up. He hoisted me to my feet and led my stagger towards his waiting car. I mumbled and slurred, vomited once next to a public

mailbox, but managed to get my tragic story out on the block-and-a-half between the fountain and the maroon Toyota sedan Will drove.

“Shit, that sucks, dude,” he said. “That really sucks. Hey, man, I'll just crash at your place tonight. You probably shouldn't be on your own tonight.”

“I'll be fine,” I assured him.

“Probably so,” he said. “But just in case. Besides, you're gonna need a ride back to your car, right?”

“You think shit through,” I told him seriously. “I like that about you.”

“Cool,” he said. I hung my head out the open passenger window like a dog, the cool wind helping my stupor quite a bit, on the short drive to my apartment. I fished the keys from my pocket – leaving them totally empty now – and handed them to will, carrying only the empty liquor bottle in the paper sack as he helped me stagger up the sidewalk and to my door.



He opened the door and led me in with the practiced ease of someone who had put many, many desperately drunk individuals into their beds over his career. He laid me carefully on my side, toeing a wastebasket near to my head, and pulled off my shoes. I completed the task in an epileptic tarantella and tossed my sweaty, booze-stinking clothes into a pile next to the bed, pulling the covers around my naked body and recalling my wish – someday *I* could be the one doing the dumping – as the room spun slowly around me and lulled me into a deep, dreamless and slightly nauseated sleep. I dimly heard Will kick off his own shoes and stretch out on my couch, turning my television on low and tuning it to what sounded like SportsCenter as I drifted out of consciousness, letting my liver get down to business.

* * *

I awoke as I customarily did, snapping on my bedside lamp and snapping instantly to full consciousness, reaching onto the bedside table for my cigarettes. I picked up the habit in my early teens and while the 'cool' factor wore off with most of my friends, it turned out that I was one of those lucky individuals who *truly* loved and enjoyed tobacco. I knew I would have to quit someday, but until that time I remained a dedicated smoker and let it be the first and last thing I did every day.

Truth be told, the morning cigarette stood as the first thing to be enjoyed at the start of the day. Every part of me seemed to infuse itself with the limitless hope and possibility of the new day. I loved the beginning of the day and usually went out of my way to savor every second. Energy budded inside me and I leaned back against my headboard, dragging sensuously on the long, skinny Virginia Slims cigarette and finger-combing the tangles from my long, slightly curly blonde hair.



Levering myself up from my bed with a burst of energy, I ground out my lifeline cigarette in the bedside tray and stretched like a cat, back arched so my blonde hair tickled the top of my ass and my firm C-cups jutting proudly out from my chest.. With a perky, peppy stride, I bounced happily into the bathroom and stepped into the shower just as the first rosy shreds of light limned the purple above the dark treeline outside my window.

I didn't soak in the shower the way I preferred – I certainly didn't lift the hand-spout from its cradle and masturbate with the warm jet of water the way I adored – but instead exfoliated my skin with a little pink bath pouf and then a moisturizing botanical body gel, shampooed and conditioned my hair, then shaved my legs and armpits and trimmed my pubic hair back into a slender little strip. The blonde hairs on my crotch always made me a little bit proud and brought a smile to my lips. I was one of the rare breed – a *natural* blonde.

I wrapped myself in a towel and wrapped another around my wet hair while I moisturized yet again. Even though my morning ablutions were involved and somewhat complicated, I had them down to a science and could

perform them all quickly and efficiently. I sat on the closed lid of the toilet and gave my toenails a quick coat of pastel pink enamel, since the previous coat had been chipped a little when I decided to wear peep-toes the other day. I brushed my teeth and quickly and mercilessly plucked my eyebrows back into a high arch. I lit another cigarette and relaxed for a bit, thumbing through a copy of *Vogue* next to the toilet as I smoked, before tackling the long and involved task of drying and styling my long hair.

I had just begun to brush it out when it struck me – *this isn't quite right*.

I wasn't sure how it didn't add up – I was only doing the things I'd always done, since I was a little girl.

Girl? I thought in shock. *I was never a girl.*

Of course you were, Jessica, a voice inside my head seemed to say. It calmed me for a moment before the shock returned, pushing aside complete and vivid memories of my girlhood – playing with Barbies on the bedroom floor with my best friend, going to gymnastics and ballet, having a pony at my eighth birthday party. Being a cheerleader in high school and giving my first blowjob behind the band hall after the Winter Formal to Steven Vandekamp. Sneaking my first cigarette from my mom's purse and smoking it in the side garden between the houses. My first purse. My first pair of high heels and prancing around the house for days, refusing to take them off. The first time Mom ever let me wear makeup to school. Getting my period.

All in perfect, flawless detail down to the smallest minutae.

Flawless, except for being *wrong*. Even though I couldn't evoke them no matter how I concentrated, I knew those memories were *supposed* to be of playing G.I. Joes with Kevin McLennon, going to Little League with my dad, and breaking my leg falling out of a tree the day before my eighth birthday. Running track in high school and getting my dick sucked in the back seat of my dad's Lincoln by Stephanie Vandekamp after Winter Formal. Swiping a cigarette from my dad and smoking it in the attic while he and my stepmom were at the grocery store. My first suit. Bribing Tommy Hudgens to buy a condom for me from the vending machine in the truck stop bathroom and carrying it in my wallet for six months until it dried out and crumbled. The first time my Dad let me use the table saw. My first home run.

Those were what I was *supposed* to be remembering.

Which was just silly. If those things were true, then I wouldn't be me. I wouldn't be Jessica Elizabeth Cornwell. Twenty-six years old, working part

time as a hairdresser and nail tech in a salon on the weekends and waiting tables at Twin Peaks during the week while I took online classes. I wouldn't know how to put on makeup and do my own hair and look sexy as hell. I probably wouldn't even know how to keep from poking out my own eyes with my long acrylic nails.

Jeff. Jeff Cornwell. I'm a system administrator at a web commerce firm. I already have a college degree. I *don't* know anything about makeup or hair or nails. I never wanted to.

But I've *always* been interested in cosmetology. It's why I never went to a four-year school. I pooled my money from working at The Limited and went to Baldwin Beauty Academy instead. Got a certificate in cosmetology in lieu of a bachelor's degree. Other girls my age were more successful with their degrees, but I had more fun. Besides, money and success weren't my real ambitions. I had daddy's money to hold me – and there was plenty of that – and way too much fun to have in the meantime to concern myself with any kind of a career. I liked not needing to worry about promotions and reputation and 401K's. My job consisted of hustling for tips and trying to get my pictures in the running for the yearly calendar or making girls look good for dates or job interviews or just because they needed to feel pretty. It satisfied more, keeping it light like that.

Whoever this Jeff character was, he seemed to be losing credibility, since without even paying attention during all this deep mental musing, I managed to dry my hair and style it, scrunching some glitter-infused gel into the roots and teasing it out a bit to give it volume and adding a little girly braid down the left side of my face. I added a little sparkly butterfly barette to clip the braid into place. I'd even managed to get my face primed with a light coat of foundation and concealer, ready for makeup, while trying desperately to convince myself I was once a boy.

I cradled my ample tits in my hands and bounced them playfully in the mirror, giggling. *Yeah*, I thought. *Such a boy*.

But even so, the lingering doubt still clung. Just to reassure myself, I closed my eyes and imagined Channing Tatum with his shirt off. Thankfully, the telltale little rush of musky wetness slicked my insides and perked up my little pink clit. I felt my labia swell a little and seem to beg for a touch. It made me smile. *Nope*, I thought smugly. *No boys here*.

I stopped, gasping. While I'd been musing, lost in thought, I'd spoiled my base coat of makeup by smearing the lower half of my face with shaving cream and held my pink razor poised to start shaving my upper lip. The

way I'd always done, every morning since I turned fourteen. My dad had showed me how. I remembered it vividly.

What the fuck is happening to me?

I wiped the offending lather from my face with a sense of panic, backing away from the mirror as if the pretty blonde with the emerald green eyes and the heart-shaped face staring back at me was a total stranger, seen for the first time.

Something surfaced, buried deep in my thoughts, rising to the top from a murky place in my recollection just long enough to be recognized before descending back into the depths. A stray snippet of thought, barely formed, like from a half-remembered dream.

I wish...

I just managed to pick out the impression of a cheap gold engagement ring laid out on a bed of glittering coins, shifting and wavering in its perspective like it was under water.

I wish...

Makeup forgotten, I tossed my long hair over one shoulder with a motion practiced enough to be reassuring – *nobody but a girl who's worn her hair long her entire life could know exactly how to toss her head so her hair would fall right over her shoulder and stay out of her face* – and sashayed in my self-assured, catwalk model strut back into the bedroom. I sat on the edge of my bed, pausing long enough to light another of the long, slender Virginia Slims, and then delved into my little Vuitton hobo bag which had been last night's purse. The designer purse seemed to ease the tension somewhat - *a boy wouldn't know it was a Vuitton*, I told myself with relief, *much less that it was a hobo bag and not a clutch or a tote*. And it was another subtle reminder of daddy's money. Anything that reinforced her lifetime as a girl seemed to help, to place another sturdy brick in the wall of my self-confidence and identity.

Not for the first time I half-wished that I could just dangle the long cigarette from one lip and use both hands to sort through the confusing morass inside my purse, but habit compelled me to keep it between my first two long-nailed fingers and use just the ring finger, pinky and thumb of my left hand to sort through. Dangling a cigarette from one lip was so unladylike. My mother would never have done it and would have criticized me for it had she seen. I could get away with all kinds of devilry as a girl where Mama

was concerned, but the cardinal sin was always being unladylike. There was no forgiveness.

Memories of last night eluded my best efforts to recapture them. Something had happened last night, something that triggered these unsettling *faux* memories of boyhood and masculinity, something about a ring and a wish which made her doubt her own life and experience. Her simple ambitions and desires – a handsome husband with lots of money and a big dick, being a lingerie model, getting her boobs done and driving a Jaguar – now seemed infinitely complicated since I could no longer feel assured they were *mine*.

The archaeological dig of my purse usually yielded clues to hazy nights. So I sifted through, laying out the contents of my purse on the bed beside me. My wallet, holding my platinum card and my gas card and my Macy's card and my Victoria's Secret card and my identification emblazoned with *my* picture and the name Jessica Elizabeth Cornwell, weight 108 lbs., height 5'-5", hair blonde, eyes green, sex *female*. The heart-shaped keychain with the name *Jessica* picked out in pink rhinestones and the keys to my apartment, my mailbox and my little blue diesel Volkswagen Jetta attached. Packs of tissue and gum. Two protein bars. A makeup compact and several assorted tubes of lipstick and lip gloss. A hairbrush. My little pink iPod wound about with my pink ear-buds. My pink Android Razr phone, blinking with text message notifications from friends who knew me as Jessica and no one else. Emergency tampons. A dried-out tube of mascara which should have been pitched ages ago. Three books of matches and a half-pack of Virginia Slims 120's. Several pairs of sunglasses, from aviators to heart-shaped plastic, depending on my outfit.

I sighed heavily, sitting back. Usually my purse held at least three business cards or cocktail napkins with the names of boys who hit on me when I went out. But my purse contained no numbers, no desperate little attempts by strangers to see my naked body. I know I went out last night – the slightly cottonmouthed feeling and the throbbing pressure behind my eyes proved it amply enough – and my inability to recall events such as where I was or how I got home hinted at a large quantity of alcohol consumed. But there seemed to be no evidence. Just another blank space which tried to fill itself with broken images of wishes and rings and water and coins.

I puffed on my long cigarette – amazing that even after years of smoking it still made me feel just a little bit like a movie star – and sifted through my text messages and Facebook status updates of the last few days, looking for clues to my own whereabouts. Facebook had me checked in at the gym, the restaurant, the salon where I worked, the tanning place and the

Starbucks near my apartment over the last few days, but no indication of where I went last night.

The text messages offered no help either. Multiple requests of “hey girl where r u?” and “whats the plan?” peopled my phone but no firm evidence of having met any of my girlfriends anywhere last night. Lots of pretty-girl names which immediately associated with pretty-girl faces in my memory. Brittany. Kayleigh. Danielle. Tiffany. Heather. Michelle.

But no one stood out as my bestie, either. *I know I have a best friend, I thought angrily. I've always had a best friend. She lived next door to me, we grew up together.* But I couldn't see her face and I couldn't remember her name. I just knew she was there. And I had no texts or wall posts from her. No indication of where or who she might be. Just that unnerving certainty of her existence despite complete lack of proof.

This is so fucking weird.

I took a final deep drag from my cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray next to my bed, then stood and walked back to the bathroom, a plume of smoke escaping my lips and trailing over one shoulder. Sure, I had questions. Lots of them. But makeup wasn't going to apply itself, and it was pushing eight o'clock in the morning and I still didn't have my face on. Unladylike, and therefore intolerable.

* * *

I returned to the bathroom and scrubbed my face lightly with a remover cloth, then set about reapplying the makeup I'd inadvertently ruined lathering my face earlier. My fingers navigated the long nails with the ease of long familiarity and plied the various brushes and sponges with practiced skill. Instinctively, snippets of intimate knowledge popped through my brain as I observed myself applying my makeup, little ideas which I could *only* know by long use and practice. *L'oreal makes the best pressed powder foundation and goes really well with the Maybelline concealer. It's cheaper than the Revlon stuff I used to use but works just as well. Even though, I still love the Revlon stuff. Their lip colors are better than anybody else's out there unless you go way upscale. I mean, I have the case full of the high-dollar M.A.C. cosmetics but I only drag those out for special occasions. And I'm really starting to love the new Rimmel eye palettes. I've always loved the cut-crease look and they make it so easy. I was getting tired of the same old smoky eye over and over.*

Somehow, it all digested more and more easily. The feeling of “this is wrong” diminished with each new factoid that surfaced, every preference

for this bronzer over than one, every bias towards this eyeliner as opposed to that one seemed to erode the colossal sense of misplacement and make me feel more and more at ease with the pretty face in the mirror.

Except that the skillful ministrations of the brushes and sponges no longer allowed me to typefy myself as merely “pretty.” Once I had a little color and contour applied, I was *gorgeous*. Centerfold, magazine-cover gorgeous. A little swell of pride buoyed me. Fun and freedom from care apparently wasn't the sole reason for my vocation as a cosmetologist. I also happened to be extremely good at it. My face would not have appeared out of place on any red carpet or photo shoot.

I tousled my hair artfully to give myself a “just out of bed” look and blew myself a playful little pouty kiss in the mirror to celebrate my beauty. Never before in my life – at least the life I think I remembered – had I felt such a feeling of urgency to get out of the house and let people see me. I seemed more comfortable with the idea of *escaping* notice, before, but I felt nothing like that today. No, I wanted heads to turn. I wanted jaws to drop. I wanted *everyone* to stop what they were doing and just *look* at me. The desire from the boys, the jealousy from the girls. That, in no small part, led me to my little white chest of drawers and into the topmost cabinet where my lingerie resided. I selected a lace-trimmed corset with garters, a thong panty and some silk stockings. I wanted the feeling of the boudoir with me today, that sexy little *pop* as I felt the lacy, silky underthings against my skin and the pulls and tugs of the restrictive garments.

The stockings slid up my hairless legs – I remembered I'd only waxed a few days before – and the corset clasped around me. I left the laces undone for the time being – remembering how difficult it made dressing if I laced it closed too soon, as if I'd worn corsets before, which I could not be sure about. I selected some clothes and laid them out on the bed for myself, a pair of distressed blue denim “skinny” jeans and some summery white wedge sandals with crisscrossed straps. A little wraparound tunic top in a pastel pink that looked amazing next to my spray tan. Some dangly hoop earrings with big pink beads and a little choker necklace with a rhinestone bow, some clattering pink and silver bangle bracelets and a slender little ladies' watch with a pink band. Girly, flirtatious and innocent on the outside, black and lacy and seductive beneath. *Perfect*.

I heard a strange sound from my front room – a snoring snort with some smacking lips. But no alarm signals – something every girl who lived on her own developed quickly – clanged in my brain. Somehow, I knew exactly what it was.

My boyfriend. He fell asleep on the couch again.

Breath caught in my throat. Boyfriend? I only just managed to grasp the concept of being a lifelong girl, to swallow the discomfort and alarm surrounding the simple concept of femininity and now it fell to me to adjust to the fact that I had a boyfriend? I suppose it followed logically – I was pretty, and young, and sexy and alive and it only stood to reason someone was fucking me. A boy was fucking me. But it almost overwhelmed my hung-over brain and I had to sit down hard on my bed, air leaving me in a rush.

Strange, out-of-place thoughts rushed in to attempt to stem the tide of shock. *It's only Will. He falls asleep on the couch all the time. He works late, and he doesn't like to wake me up if I'm already asleep. It's really sweet of him. We met about three months ago at the bar where he works. I was there with my girlfriends and he was tending bar and we hit it off. He took me out country-western line dancing. I'd never done it before. He pulled out my chair for me and he remembered what I drink. Lots of really romantic "little things." I went back to his place that night and immediately gave up the pussy to him. Maybe not the greatest lover I've ever had but I was so fucking wet that night I didn't need much to get off. And he is really sweet when he tries to be. I've definitely had worse boyfriends.*

Worse boyfriends? I've never even *had* a boyfriend!

Of course you have, silly. You've had tons of them. A girl like you never goes long without a boyfriend. You're way too hot to stay single for long, the memories reassured me.

I lit an unsteady cigarette – God, I was smoking like a chimney this morning, what with the one soul-deep shock after another treatment I received from life in general – and took a moment to try and calm myself. The memories that trickled down past my numbing alarm tried to make me okay with this upheaval. I wasn't sure I *wanted* to be okay with it. But I didn't want to be overwhelmed, either. So instead I got both, with a heaping spoonful of “conflicted” to go with it.

Just relax, girly girl, the memories bade me. *Just go in there. Take a look at him. Once you lay eyes on that cute little face of his, you'll be fine. You'll remember why you went out with him in the first place – he has nice abs and a sweet smile and you love his dimples. He has this super-fine baby hair and it feels so good to run your fingers through. Once you get a look at him you'll feel better. All of this will just go away.*

Just go away. That sounded pretty good. I slipped my feet into a pair of peep-toe platform pumps – I didn't want to risk putting a run in my silk stockings walking around in them and besides – I was already in the corset

and stockings, it only made sense to complete the sexbomb outfit. My stride adjusted automatically to the skyscraper heels and my peppy little strut transformed into a sultry, seductive little glide which made my butt trace enticing shapes in the air behind me. I loved the *click-clack* of my heels on the laminate wooden floor. I forced down the side of my mind which demanded that my underwear didn't cover enough of me and my chest should *not* press together like that, that I'd never worn a stitch of lace in my life and my hair should not be tickling the tops of my shoulders. I got my ears pierced the first time when I was eleven – *I remembered it, dammit!* – and I refused to let myself get upset by thinking that I never wore earrings. I picked the dangling hoops out myself. It was a BOGO at The Icing in the mall. Normally I shopped boutique but I had been looking in the mall for a birthday present for my girl MacKenzi and saw them through the window.

Just go see your boyfriend, the memories prompted.

So I sashayed into the living room, perched on heels which should have felt precarious but didn't.

SUNLIGHT SLATTED THROUGH THE CLOSED blinds across Will's still, sleeping face, limning the strong line of his jaw and the little hints of his dimples, bringing out golden highlights in his chestnut hair. I drank in his boyish good looks and the wide shoulders and well-defined pectorals and felt my nipples stiffen along with a sudden swell of pride. *I have a hot fucking boyfriend,* I thought with a sexually charged smile as I dragged from my cigarette luxuriously. That small part of me which had rebelled all morning against every normal thing in my life, that *not-Jessica* part of me, screamed defiance at the very concept of finding a man attractive; that part faded into a sullen silence at the warm, musky flood which seeped into existence between my silken thighs and the cloying scent of my arousal which overpowered the acrid smell of cigarette smoke and the subtle floral perfumes of my cosmetics. Not only did my hot boyfriend attract me – he made me *fucking wet*. Take *that*, not-Jessica.

I perched on my heels, just running my eyes up and down Will's well-defined and slender body, until I could no longer find any teasing thrill in making myself wait. I knelt deftly, in my skyscraper heels, alongside the couch and ran my long-nailed fingers up the inseam of his pants until they came to rest against his warm crotch, stroking and caressing until his body stirred beneath my touch and his slumbering cock took on a rigidity and a throbbing length. I licked my lips hungrily, my own excitement mounting, as he issued a throaty moan and pushed his pelvis up against my hand.

“Hey, baby,” he muzzed sleepily. I said nothing, simply unzipping his fly with the tips of long, French-manicured fingernails and sliding his jeans past his ankles, leaving his cock to throb gently in the air to the rhythm of his heartbeat. He shucked from his soft cotton tee as I stripped out a rubber from its package and rolled it down his length, then straddled him, guiding the blunt head of his cock into the musky, slick wet void yawning between my thighs. I settled down onto him with a delighted, squealing sigh as he parted my inner velvet, stretching me wide to accommodate him deep inside my body. The quintessentially *feminine* feeling of having this pulsating, insistent invader *inside* my body, shouted down the not-Jessica voice into non-existence as I arched my back and started rocking back and forth, generating that delicious friction and angling myself just so to rub my budding, insistent clitoris against his shaft as I rocked back and forth.



Will moaned happily and gripped my waist tight, slamming me down hard onto his cock and turning my happy, girlish squeals into grunts. A sheen of sweat sprung out over my bouncing breasts as my *lovemaking* morphed into outright *fucking* and I started to growl and grunt in time with him, my

juices flooding from me and coating his balls and the insides of his thighs, turning the sound of our physical union into sloppy, wet slaps. I felt my ass start to jiggle as he rammed into me harder and harder.

Just to remind that *not-me* part of myself that persisted in making itself so annoyingly known, I tilted my hips a little bit differently on every downstroke, letting the blunt head of his cock press against familiar-yet-unfamiliar parts of my wet, velvety interior. *That's my cervix he's bumping against*, I thought. Well, he bumped against it occasionally, with a whole lot of my help, since he wasn't very big, but it was still my cervix. *And that's my g-spot. And that's that sweet little place on the right side that makes me feel just like that when he rubs up against it. And that little tickle I'm feeling, starting between my ass cheeks and swelling up and down? That's the beginning of an orgasm. Take that, Not-me. You can't tell me I'm not a girl.*

“Oh, God,” he grunted hoarsely. “Oh, Jesus.”

Any victory felt by conquering my strange feelings of not being myself dwindled to nothingness as his strokes became shorter and more insistent. *Oh, for Christ's sake*, I thought disgustedly as I bounced rhythmically up and down. *Not yet. I was just getting going!*

He clutched my waist hard and pushed himself up into me, his face a twisted mask of half-pain and half-rapture. I felt his spasmodic jerks inside me and the sweet little tickle I hoped would have grown into a mind-bending orgasm faded and died as he slowly deflated inside me. I felt his cock pop out of me, leaving only the warm, dangling weight of the condom hanging from me.

I sank down across his well-muscled chest and drew little circles in his damp chest hair with a long fingernail, pressing little baby kisses into his neck and shoulder while he caught his breath. His hand stroked my hair a little – never enough tenderness to satisfy but enough to make me suspect there was much more where that little bit came from – and kissed the top of my head.

“That was a really nice way to wake up,” he mumbled to me.

“I thought so, too,” I purred, trying my best to set aside my disappointment and frustration and make the encounter more about him. Perhaps I could force the issue and have sex be all about me later. When I wasn't feeling so conflicted.

“Not that I'm complaining,” he said, “but what brought that on?”

I shrugged, dragging my breasts against his chest enough to stiffen my nipples. “I dunno,” I giggled. “I just saw you laying there, all sweet like that, and I just wanted to jump your bones. So I did.”

He tipped my face up to his own with a finger beneath my chin – a sudden sense of shock descended on me at how much bigger, stronger and more physically powerful he was than I which took my breath away a little bit – and fixed me eye-to-eye. “So we're okay?”

I smiled. “Of course we're okay, baby,” I told him.

He released a breath I hadn't realized he'd been holding. “Good,” he said. “I don't like it when we fight. As pissed off as you were last night, Jess, I thought we were in trouble.”

Try as I might, no recollection of the last night came to me when I attempted to recall events. Only a gray, pallid haze existed, resistant to any effort of mine to give it shape or form or sequence. But it didn't surprise me to hear that Will and I had been arguing. We did that a lot lately.

“Honestly, babe, I can't even remember what we were fighting about,” I said honestly. “But you *are* my boyfriend. And my boyfriend shouldn't be sleeping on my couch like this. Whatever is going on between us, we need to get it sorted out so we can get back to being together.”

He took my generic description of events as gospel and his face fractured into a relieved smile. “I think so, too, sweetheart,” he told me. “I'm so glad you feel like that, too. I'm sick of fighting all the time.”

“Me, too,” I said. “Y'know, maybe we should back up a few steps. Start over, kinda.”

“What d'you mean?” he said, pushing himself up onto his elbows a little.

A certain discomfort settled over me which Will interpreted as coyness. I added a little to it by twisting a strand of blonde hair around my finger and biting my bottom lip. “Look, we got together for a reason, right? When this first started out, we never fought.”

“Yeah, I guess we didn't,” Will replied.

“So we back up,” I told him. “Tonight, you and I should go out. On a date. You run to your place and shave and put on something nice. I'll do my makeup and my hair and wear something sexy. You take me out to a nice place, get me something romantic, we'll have some dinner and maybe go

dancing, have a few drinks... seduce me. Win me over, like you did when we first started out.”

He chuckled. “Hey... it was you who came on to *me*, if you remember.”

“Then it's your turn,” I told him glibly, glossing over my lack of memory. “It's only fair.”

He thought for a second, then nodded. “I can probably get somebody to cover for me tonight at work,” he said. “You're on. I'll pick you up around seven, okay?”

“Sounds good,” I told him, standing up and palming the cooling rubber which slipped wetly from my pussy. “And Will, I really want you to knock my socks off, okay? I could really use feeling like the princess in a storybook for a night, okay?”

He gave me a sly wink, which reminded me why I must have pursued him in the first place with its cute boyishness and flirtatious quality. That, and the way the light hit his face – he was a *handsome* devil, to be sure. I suspected strongly that I went for him because I had to compete for him. That just seemed like something I would do – going for the guy that all the other girls were after.

He kissed me and pulled on his clothes quickly, then disappeared through my front door in a quick bustle. I sunk down onto the couch and lit a cigarette, staring away into space for a while, trying whatever I could think of to recollect any details from my relationship with Will. Nothing came to mind. I looked through my bookshelves and bedside table for a diary or a journal. Nothing. Only a few nondescript text messages back and forth remained in my phone, not enough to give me any clues at all to where or how Will and I met. Hell, I didn't even recognize any of the names in the contact list, to be honest. I had text messages and emails from three dozen different people whom I *knew* were friends or work associates but for the life of me couldn't be placed with a recognizable face.

I tossed my own apartment pretty thoroughly, looking for clues to my own past, with little success. Only the most superficial evidence surfaced, just enough to let me know that I was a twenty-six year old cosmetician and hairdresser with dreams of becoming a lingerie model or an actress, sitting on a fat trust fund from her daddy, dating a bartender named Will. My closet and browser history showed evidence of compulsive shopping and I had no real commitments to anything other than a gym membership and a tanning salon. I wasn't much of a cook, given the state of my pantry and cupboards, but I did have a fondness for white wine, hummus and

cigarettes, since those were the only consumables in my apartment. I didn't really have any idea who or what I was from context clues – even my Facebook updates amounted only to “heading out to Stinky's for drinks with my bitches” or “wish it would stop raining.”

I suppose my lack of history alarmed me, but no feeling beyond just a mild curiosity and a sense of frustration occurred in response. My mind flitted away from any mystery quickly, alighting on other, more pleasant diversions instead. Going through my closet on a hunt for answers to my mysterious past turned into a little-girl session of playing “dress-up” as I found piles of cute clothing and shoes to try on as if I'd never seen them before. That morphed into a quest for what I planned to wear on my date, which in turn transformed into a desire to go shopping for *just* the right outfit despite the staggering amount of clothing and footwear I already owned.

My inability to concentrate fit me, somehow, as I scooped my blonde hair into a loose *chignon* and laced myself into a pink jacquard corset which nipped in my already tiny waist and pushed my boobs into a tempting valley. I dangled a pair of silvery, spangled hoops from my earlobes and shimmied my way into a pair of skin-tight jeans and then wormed my toes into a pair of pink platform pumps. I took a moment to touch up my makeup – a little wrecked from my morning's activities – and then transfer my wallet, keys, phone, backup cosmetics, hairbrush, cigarettes and sunglasses into a little pink fringed Dooney & Bourke purse from my black calfskin Michael Kors tote from last night.



With a devilishly sexy wiggle in my pert buttocks, I *click-clacked* down the little walkway in my platform heels and down the concrete steps towards my little white 3-series Beamer for a trip to the stores to pick out something sexy for my big date.

* * *

I spent the next six hours in a blissful state of consumer euphoria, pawing my way through rack after rack of clothing in every store I passed which struck my fancy – all staffed with svelte, overdressed twentysomethings with flat bellies and perky tits, looking stylishly bored as they wended through tables and racks and mannequins to the beat of piped-in club music. I paused only for a spray tan, a quick fill of my French-manicured nails and an overpriced salad at a little sidewalk eatery catering to those wishing to be seen as much as wishing to be fed. I arrived back at my apartment around four-thirty – pushing my time limit to get myself ready for my date – laden with sacks and bags. My quest for a single perfect outfit led me to purchase three new outfits, complete with shoes, handbags and jewelry for each, and new cosmetic palettes with *just* the right colors to

match what I'd found. All charged haphazardly to a platinum card with barely a look spared at the receipts and totals.

God, I am a spoiled, shallow little rich bitch, I thought.

It made me stop. Another one of those third-person thoughts, emanating from that new, disturbing *not-Jessica* place inside my head. Self-recrimination, buyer's remorse, self-criticism – those were not things I dealt with. I seldom thought of myself as anything but pretty, sweet and innocent. I viewed myself as smart and capable and several times today had disgustedly seen my inability to concentrate and short attention span not as cute and effervescent and fun but as the marks of an *airhead* or a *bimbo* or a *dumb blonde*. It unsettled me and brought in doubts where none had ever resided.



These thoughts continued to plague me as I showered, perfumed, curled my hair, painted my toenails, slipped into a thong and push-up bra beneath a little purple cocktail dress with a sequined hem and then applied heavy, dramatic (*slutty*, the *not-Jessica* part of me thought, but I stomped it down

mercilessly) evening makeup as I downed two glasses of wine and smoked several more of the long, slender cigarettes I favored.

I timed it elegantly – the knock came at my door as I approached the three-quarters ready mark, and I got the girlish thrill of making Will wait in the front room as I finished, directing him with a raised soprano voice to sit down, make himself comfortable and pour himself a drink while I added the finishing touches to what I considered the night's masterpiece. Truthfully, the act of preparing for something like this thrilled me more than the doing. I knew he and I would be have sex tonight, but I also knew that nothing in Will's sexual repertoire could make me so wet, willing and trembling with anticipation as the moments leading up to his first sight of me.

I blew myself a playful kiss in the mirror as I gave my hair one last fluff with my fingers and then went into the little living room of the apartment, striking a sexy pose against the doorjamb for full effect. My efforts did not go unrewarded. Will's breath caught in his throat and he swallowed hard, and a tiny, barely-audible *wow* escaped his lips at the sight of me. My face split in a beaming smile.

"My God, baby," he breathed. "You look incredible."

I lowered my eyes coquettishly and blushed a little. "Thanks," I said softly. "But you. Look at you."

He turned a little circle, showing off his tailored slacks and tan sportcoat over a black tee and the little hint of gelled spikiness in his hair. "Yeah, I clean up kinda nice, don't I?" he chuckled. He took a little bouquet of carnations – at least he remembered they were my favorites (and *I* didn't even remember they were my favorites until that very moment) – off of the counter where he'd put them in a little vase.

"These are for you," he said. "I remembered that you liked these. I went ahead and put them in some water for you."

I took them and buried my nose in the fragrant blossoms, mixing their own perfume with the scents of my high-end makeup and my Chanel No. 5. "You are such a doll," I told him. "I *love* carnations."

"I'm glad," he said. "But hey – as much as I'd like to stand here and stare at you in that dress, we do have an eight o'clock reservation at Hildebrandt's."

My eyebrows quirked up at the mention of one of the city's more exclusive and celebrated restaruants.

“You got us a last-minute reservation at Hildebrandt's?” I said a little disbelievingly. “Seriously? I thought it was really hard to get a table there.”

“I know the bartender. He and I used to sling booze at Bloody Mary's together a few years back. He owed me a favor, so I had him get us on the list,” Will said proudly. My smile widened. Will really was taking his chance to reboot our relationship seriously. I honestly hadn't expected him to go to the trouble – a part of me anticipated him to phone this in, and I couldn't be sure if it was me or not-Jessica or some combination of both doing the doubting.

He offered me an arm in mock gallantry. “We should get going, babe.”

I threaded my arm through his and pressed my breasts against his forearm as I did, a tacit promise of the night to come.

* * *

Over the evening, I began to rewrite the holes in my memory with images that pleased me, changing the faint sense of disappointment and malaise which surrounded my relationship with Will into one of security, affection and desire. Will played the perfect gentleman, opening the door for me, pulling out my chair, lighting my cigarettes and ordering for me from the menu. I got a little sparkling, story-book thrill at the words “The lady will have...” as he selected my entrée. He ordered champagne with dinner and then took me dancing – not to the noisy, undulating clubs I hazily remembered preferring this time but to a rooftop jazz bar, full of older couples in nice clothes who didn't hit on other people and kept to themselves. He insulated me from the men who usually hit on me, keeping me all to himself like some kind of precious treasure, making me feel wanted and cherished in a way I hadn't known I wanted so badly. His touch never strayed far – in the small of my back, on my shoulder, a warm hand on my wrist, his fingers interlaced through mine. By the time we arrived back at my apartment, I had a head full of expensive wine and well-executed romance. My pussy nearly dripped with arousal and we barely managed to get the door shut behind us before I dropped to my knees and unzipped his fly, giving him a hungry blowjob as he leaned against my wall. Not-Jessica seemed to think that even with Will's not-so-impressive size (which only a real girl would have known wasn't impressive, I sought to remind not-Jessica) that no way could it fit completely inside my throat. Using a little bit of knowledge gathered from the internet and a whole lot of saliva, I brought his balls to rest against my chin in my very first (to my knowledge) deep-throat. I felt very womanly – not just the fierce satisfaction of proving the annoying not-Jessica wrong, but something more

profound. Something very fulfilling and utterly feminine about being able to take *my man all the way* inside.

We continued into the bedroom, where he stripped me from my clothes and left me on the bed wearing only my gold choker and my platform heels. He knelt between my thighs and tongued me – not as much as I had wished he would, but I appreciated the effort – and then mounted me, bringing me to two sweet little squealing orgasms before spending himself inside the condom and sagging to rest next to me on the sweat-dampened mattress. Better sex than the morning, but I did long for the screaming, back-clawing release I knew waited within me. He'd learn, I convinced myself. It's just a matter of practice.

He panted next to me as I fumbled around the pile of discarded clothing for my dropped purse, then lit a cigarette and rolled onto my side to face him. He smiled at me fondly.

“Well, baby? Did that do what you hoped it would do?” he asked.

I smiled. “I think it did,” I said.

“I'm really glad,” he told me. “And look. You're right. We shouldn't be fighting all the time, especially not about something that should be a happy thought. Maybe it's just too early to be talking about it. We should wait – have more dates, more fun times – before we start having the heavyweight conversations like that.”

I had no idea what he meant, but I nodded behind a billowing plume of exhaled smoke. He coughed a little and I waved it away from him.

“I probably will keep bugging you about quitting that, though,” he teased. “It's really not good for you. And I get enough secondhand at the bar.”

I held up a finger. “Not tonight,” I said. “Just let tonight be tonight.”

“Okay,” he said, smiling. “You're right.”

I decided to go for broke. “How do you remember the first time we met?” I asked. “I don't think I ever asked you that before. I mean, I know what I remember and what I was thinking, but I never knew what was going through your head.”

He chuckled a little, raking fingers through sweat-damp hair. “I remember it was Friday and the place was fucking *packed*,” he began, looking over my shoulder as if peering through the intervening time. “I wish I could say I'd noticed you from the moment you walked into my bar, but there

were so many people. Me and Tommy could barely keep ahead of the orders. The waitresses were yelling, the customers were yelling, I was pouring drinks as fast as I could and just, like, throwing 'em down the bar. Hell, I don't even remember if everybody paid for them. And just when I thought 'If one more person orders a drink from me, I swear I'm walking. I'm just gonna quit.' And then I hear this voice.

“I remember you had on that little zebra-striped dress with the silver buckle on it and you had pink streaks in your hair,” he continued. “And some girl at the salon was getting her nail tech license and talked you into this wild Hello Kitty rhinestone manicure for one of her grades. I turned around and boom, there you were, just staring at me. I thought we were supposed to know each other, the way you were looking at me. I remember I started thinking 'Oh, crap, is this somebody I was a dick to in high school or something?' But then you smiled and you said, 'I *said*, who do I have to fuck to get a drink around here?' And before I even knew what I was doing, like, way before my brain could kick into 'Dude, don't say that out loud' mode, I just blurt out 'That would be me.'

“So I'm standing there like an idiot, hoping you're not gonna, like, throw a glass at me or slap my face or ask for my manager. But you just laughed. I mean, like, belly laughed, and then you said 'Vodka cranberry, then, and you can put it on my tab.' And I'm, like, 'Your tab?' And you laugh again and you're, like, 'If I have to fuck you for it, then I'm getting the bottle.' And you go to light a cigarette so I whip out the matches and light you and you put your hand around my wrist to keep it steady. I remember it gave me goosebumps. And you looked at me really hard and then it was like the whole bar just went silent. All I could hear was you, saying, 'I'm Jessica.'

“You wrote your number down on the matches I used – you used a pink pen and I still have that matchbook in my drawer back at my place – and I called you that night. We went to IHOP after the bars closed and talked until the sun rose over Belgian waffles and bad coffee. I remember heading back to my place thinking, y'know, that all the time I've been tending bar I convinced myself that the woman of my fucking dreams was *never* gonna just walk in and give me her number. That just wasn't how shit worked outside of the movies. And damned if it might have just fucking happened.”

I kissed his chest. “I'm the woman of your dreams? Really?” I asked.

“Baby, my dreams didn't even come close,” he told me.

I actually felt a little sentimental tear well up in the corner of one eye which I blinked away rapidly. “I hope you know that you're onto something, here,” I

told him. “This. Tonight. This is what I want. This is the relationship I want. I want you, remembering how much I love carnations and getting all silly and stumbly when you see me wearing something hot and pulling out my chair for me and telling me sweet stories about how we met. If you can keep this up, Will, then we might be able to move on to that heavyweight stuff you want.”

“I think I can do that,” he said, nuzzling my shoulder. “So, this is a second chance?”

I stubbed out my cigarette and made a pillow of my soft hair against his chest, burrowing in. “For both of us, baby,” I whispered, listening to his muffled heartbeat with contentment.

* * *

A week passed before I realized Will's fatal flaw. A week of romantic little text messages, little “I'm thinking of you” moments when we were apart. A week of slowly improving sex and truly happy mornings waking up next to one another. And then I began to see the edges fraying. Will – I had to admit – had it in him to be absolutely perfect, except for one Achilles' heel. Will was lazy.

It started with little things. One morning, he slept a little bit later than usual and rolled out of bed without combing his hair or putting on a clean shirt. I had risen a little early to make breakfast – yes, I had even gone to the grocery store to buy things like eggs and bread and not just chardonnay and Virginia Slims – and had crept around my own bathroom to have my hair arranged and my face on, wearing a sexy little satin teddy. And he grunted at me, stuffed a piece of toast in his mouth, kissed me without even seeing me and was out the door, muttering something about having to meet one of his friends about something.

That, I blew off. But the seal was broken and it did not remain an isolated – and thus, forgivable – occurrence. More and more of the little romantic things I demanded fell tragically by the wayside. He would only text me or call me once or twice a day, now, and only about mundane things like not forgetting to pick up something at the store or recording some television show. I found myself testing him. I would do something different with my hair or makeup just to see if he noticed. I kept trying to convince myself that I could turn it around, but Will's inertia seemed impervious to any effort on my part. The tipping point finally came when I spent two hours styling my hair and doing my makeup and came into the living room wearing only a hot pink corset, a g-string and clear platform 'stripper' heels and sat on the couch next to him, open to any manner of sexual depravity he could

dream up. I told myself I would do anything he asked me to do – oral, anal, upside down or inside out – just so long as he was the one who actually asked.



I sat there, fuming and deeply hurt, smoking cigarette after cigarette and reading *Cosmopolitan* magazine while he never peeled his eyes away from a hockey game on the television. He arrived to bed hours later to find me already “asleep” (or my angry, sullen pantomime of the same) in a flannel nightgown salvaged from deep within my closet which covered me completely from ankles to neck. He made a sad, half-hearted foray for sex which I shut down with a loud, theatrical snore and a pointed roll away from him to the edge of the bed. For the first time in our relationship, or at least what I could recall of it from just the scattered feelings and senses and hunches left to me, I felt a bitter and hot angry urge to get back up, restore my makeup and hair, put the corset and thong back on, slip into a little spangly cocktail dress and head out to the clubs, find a man who *would* appreciate how I looked and the time I spent, a man who *did* want what I offered, and fuck him senseless in a bathroom or janitor's closet or back seat. A man who would stretch my pussy wide until it made me sore and would make me cum so much that my legs went

weak. Someone who was everything Will was *not*. The amount of vitriol and bile which came up out of me at the thought of cheating on him, finding another man to fill the huge gaps in my emotional and sexual landscape, surprised me and saddened me at the same time. I fell asleep much later to the sound of cicadas singing balefully in the trees outside my window and the hot, slick feel of tears on my cheeks.

* * *

I started calling that night 'The Night the Dam Broke.' Feelings shoved down inside me, bottled up and ignored or passed off as minor aberrations or the hiccups of a fledgling relationship bubbled to the fore, hot and angry, and I could not find any equilibrium other than a vaguely distasteful numbness. I felt no love, no attraction and no tenderness towards Will, only resentment and regret over the flood of *could have beens* which fluttered up like coveys of quail at his every mistake.

Strangely, though, the rift between Will and me proved to be the catalyst for intimacy between myself and this strange *not-Jessica* in my head. The little voice which constantly yammered *this isn't right* about such perfectly normal things as makeup and tampons and skirts and high heels now started telling me insistently *this isn't right* about being ignored, overlooked, underappreciated and taken for granted.

He's a creature of habit, not-Jessica told me as I took a break from styling hair at my salon, smoking a cigarette as I watched traffic pass behind the building. He wants that comfortable place where he doesn't have to try. I've seen guys like him before. They coast by on their looks. They know how to get girls, but they can't be bothered to learn how to keep girls. He thinks that he can flash that crooked little-boy smile at you and give you that melt-me look he's so good at and you're just going to forgive him for whatever he does to piss you off. He's not gonna change. Guys like that never change. They just bounce around from one girl to the next one who's gonna fall for his bullshit because he looks like Ryan Reynolds.

It came as no small shock to discover that not-Jessica was right. I did have that history – forgiving him for marginalizing me because he was just so fucking cute. And I was getting sick of it – scrubbing the dishes that he forgot to rinse off because I liked his washboard abs. I was better than that. I *did* deserve more. Not-Jessica possessed insights into the male psyche that eluded me. Almost as though not-Jessica allowed me forbidden peeks behind the curtain. And so far I did not like what I saw.

I tried to find what comfort I could in the day-to-day, but it wasn't forthcoming. The little moments – even the ones I used to enjoy, like his

washboard abs and his sheepish smile – dwindled away into isolated events more exception than rule, leaving me with only negatives to keep me company. I no longer had any sense of completion or happiness, I just navigated hopelessly around those things about Will which made me angry towards the calmer seas of the things which only disgusted me a little bit. I found myself staying longer and longer at work, seizing any opportunity to go out with the girls to this or that happy hour or whatever, just to get out of going home and facing the reminders of what a crappy relationship I'd joined.



With any cushion gone, the things about Will which really annoyed me now grated against bone, impossible to ignore, pushing me further and further along towards something drastic. Every pair of filthy socks wadded into my laundry hamper next to expensive designer clothes, every overflowing trash-can filled with *his* fast-food wrappers and beer cans, every hour spent awake from his snoring, every lackluster sexual encounter which left me tantalizingly close to orgasm but never delivered, every empty roll of toilet

paper left on the rod just convinced me further that the time had come to move on.

I rehearsed my lines carefully, still not wanting to see him hurt, running gambits past the sounding board of not-Jessica to craft a perfect break-up. I resolved to get the deed done on a Thursday afternoon after a good day at work – me and two other stylists did one day a month doing hair at the assisted living a few blocks away and always had a blast gossiping and being bitchy with the old ladies there. I turned my key in the lock and stepped into the darkened apartment, slipping my tired feet out of my wedge sandals and dropping my purse onto the table. Will heard the noise and came out of the bathroom wiping his face with a towel, still damp from shaving before he went to work.

“Hey, babe,” he said brightly. “How was your day?”

“Y'know,” I said offhandedly. “Pretty good, I guess. Do you have a little time to talk?”

“A little,” he said. “I have to be at work in an hour. But I'm glad you asked, though. I've been wanting to talk to you, too.”

I poured myself a glass of wine and sat on the couch.

“I was thinking,” he said. “Y'know, things have been going pretty well between us.”

They have? Not-Jessica spat sarcastically. *Where was I for 'pretty well'?*

“And I'm in line to get an assistant manager gig at the bar once Lance quits,” he went on, not noticing my dull expression. “I was thinking, what if we made it official? Got a bigger place, I mean, and moved in together. I know you like this area a lot, maybe a bigger place in the same complex?”

“Uh... I don't...” I stammered.

“I know,” he said, laughing nervously. “Kinda out of nowhere, right? We don't have to decide right now. It's just – remember when we started turning things around, and you said that we needed to just be boyfriend-girlfriend for a while, date and have fun, before we started having the heavy conversations again?”

He's the one who said that, not you, Not-Jessica pointed out correctly. *He's about to try and manipulate you. Watch out.*

“I guess,” I said cautiously.

“Well, we have been dating and having fun for a while,” he said. “And don't get me wrong – it's been great. It really has. But those thoughts – they never really went away for me. I put them on the back burner like you asked, but I never really forgot them.”

My lack of memory started a little grass-fire of panic throughout my chest, forcing me to take deep breaths between deep swallows of wine. “And?” I croaked.

“Look, Jessica, I love you. I've never met anyone like you,” he said. “I don't want to be with anyone else. I know that. I don't want to pretend like I'm waiting to see if something better comes along or like I have to keep my options open. So what if it's old-fashioned and all our friends think it's crazy. I don't care. I believe in stuff like marriage and babies. I want that stuff. For us. I don't want to just stop talking about it. I want to start moving towards it. Not now – I know neither of us are ready. I mean, I'd need a way better job, you'd have to stop smoking, we might even have to think about moving closer to our parents, maybe. But I want to get it out there. I want to start talking about it again. I feel like I'm just lying about it now, pretending it isn't there.”

Blood rushed in my ears and nothing resembling coherent thought coalesced in my brain. Will continued talking, but I could only see his mouth moving randomly, like watching a muted television. Blind panic, mixed with outrage and betrayal, flooded me, making my breath come shallowly and my head lurch dizzily.

Eject, Not-Jessica said. Pull the handles. If you try to talk right now, you'll wind up married and pregnant just to shut him up. Buy yourself some time and get the fuck out of here.

My voice came to my ears from miles away. “Will, you shouldn't have started this now. You have to be at work soon. I'm meeting Kayleigh at the gym in a little bit,” I said, selecting some girl from work at random for my glib lie. “We need to talk about this later, when we have time. Maybe tonight, or tomorrow afternoon or something.”

He smiled. “You're right,” he said happily. “Hey, I'm just really happy that you're willing to talk to me about it at all. Last time I tried, you bit my head off. That must mean we're making progress, right?”

I offered a sickly smile. He kissed me – I didn't even feel it – and went back into the bathroom while I speed-changed into yoga pants, sneakers and a loose top over a jog bra. I slung a gym bag over one shoulder and my purse over the other, bid him a vague farewell while he brushed his teeth

and managed to make it all the way to my car and shut the door before I hyperventilated and sagged against the leather.

“Jesus,” I rasped. “I can't breathe.”

Yes, you can, Not-Jessica said patiently. Calm down. Nothing happened. You just had an uncomfortable conversation. You're fine. Breathe in to a count of four. Hold it. Now out to a count of four. Again. In to a count of four and hold it. Now out. Again.

I sat there for five minutes or so, just getting myself out of control, letting hysterical tears course down my face, before control returned to me. In those moments, Not-Jessica became my dearest friend, coaching me down from the ledge of panic threatening to drop me into a shrieking fall.

You're together enough to drive, Not-Jessica told me calmly. Just go. Will will be coming out to go to work in a minute and if he sees you still here he's going to suspect that something's up. Just go around the block if you have to, it doesn't matter. Anywhere but here will be fine.

I heeded not-Jessica's wisdom and drove a few blocks away to a Seven-Eleven in the opposite direction Will would take to work. I lit a trembling cigarette and must have smoked half of it in a single drag before the shredded remnants of my calm knitted back together and I gained any sense of control of my surroundings.

“Oh, shit,” I asked the empty air. “What the fuck am I gonna do?”

Exactly what you planned to do, Not-Jessica told me simply. You're gonna break up with him.

“It's gonna crush him,” I whined.

So what? Not-Jessica shot back. That's his fault, not yours. You gave him his chance. Sure, maybe you could have been a little less passive-aggressive about telling him he was fucking up. You could have confronted him and just told him you were sick of the bad sex and stinky feet and the mess he makes in your apartment. But that doesn't forgive the fact that he just cornered you in there. He blindsided you with that shit.

“I could've figured out that was what he meant,” I protested.

You could've, but you shouldn't have to, Not-Jessica said. A real man would have built it up. Asking a woman to have a baby, that's huge. You don't just drop it in her lap like that. You make a relationship with her so strong and so safe and so good that bringing a baby into it is the next

logical step. A blind, deaf idiot could have seen that you weren't ready for that. He did it anyway. That tells me how blindingly selfish he is.

“You're really good at this,” I told Not-Jessica fondly.

Thanks, the voice replied. Hey. Put your Bluetooth in your ear. People are gonna stare if they see you talking to yourself like this.

“Why do I still not want to hurt him?” I asked, nestling the little black earpiece against my rhinestone heart earring with a soft *click*.

Because you don't want to hurt anyone, the voice explained. You're afraid of confrontation, Jessica, which is something you need to work on. Else, you'll find yourself in more situations like this. I'm not saying you should go pick fights with everybody, just don't run and hide when you feel like it's gonna come to a head. It's why you've been with this bastard so long when it wasn't healthy for you.

“Don't call him a bastard,” I said. “He's not *that* bad.”

Don't bullshit me, Not-Jessica chided softly. You can hardly stand the sight of him. Don't soften this. You need it to be hard if you're going to break it off with him. And for the record, he is a bastard. The romance, the attentiveness, all of that stuff – he only gave it to you in trade. So he could get what he wanted. He used it like currency and as soon as he got what he wanted he cut off the supply. It was never for you. Shit like that – it can turn into some nasty emotional abuse really quick if you let it. You don't stay with somebody for whom a relationship is a transaction unless you plan to treat them the same way.

“What really sucks is that I *do* want all that shit,” I said, fighting fresh tears. “Marriage and babies and all that shit. I really do want it. Just not right now.”

And not with him, the voice added. Don't forget that part.

“Yeah,” I sniffled.

You'll get there. A big part of that will come when you meet the right guy. In the meantime, you can cut hair and pose for calendars and have your fun. Live your life. You'll know when it's time.

“So, what now?” I asked. “I'm sitting here bawling in my car, hiding from my boyfriend and afraid to go back to my own apartment.”

Why not follow through? Not-Jessica offered. Clean yourself up a little, fix your mascara, and go ahead and go to the gym. Sweat out all this anxiety. Work out until you can barely move. You'll probably feel better if you have some kind of a physical outlet.

“I guess I could do that,” I said. “But look at me, I'm a fucking mess.”

Why else would you carry eight pounds of makeup and hairspray in your purse if not for situations just like this? Not-Jessica asked. Find yourself a bathroom and fix yourself up.

I laughed. “You're right,” I said. “Y'know, if you hadn't been so busy telling me that I shouldn't be wearing high heels and lipstick, maybe I would've started listening to you a long time ago.”

You shouldn't be wearing that shit. I mean, I shouldn't be. Whatever. It's complicated.

“Girl, you need to get used to feeling hot and sexy,” I chided, wiping my mascara-stained cheeks with a little makeup remover cloth from my purse. “Maybe you should give it a chance.”

Why would I be interested in looking hot and sexy in a short skirt and heels?

“I dunno,” I giggled happily. “Maybe 'cause it's *you* that needs to meet the right guy.”

I WAITED ABOUT TWENTY MINUTES, smoking cigarettes and trying to override my sense of panic, and made my way back to my apartment to decompress for a little while. Serenity eluded me even in spite of my customary “calm-down” activities such as cleaning my house, reading *Cosmo*, a hot bath and masturbating below the soapy surface of the water as I soaked. Still I felt caged and claustrophobic. I decided to get away from the scene of the crime, opting to go and lounge by the pool for a little while and get out of the enclosed space.

I idly remembered when going to the pool consisted only in finding a pair of nasty shorts and flip-flops and a towel – memories from another life and another person. Now, going to the pool required quite a bit of lead time. I arranged my hair in a loose, flyaway sideswept style secured with a large red silk rose barette which made me feel a bit like a 1940s pin-up girl. In keeping with that style, I slipped myself into a little red bikini with white foil hearts spangled across it. I liberally applied my sunscreen and BB cream, then a little bit of lipstick that matched my swimsuit. I perched on a pair of

cork-soled platform wedge mules with red canvas uppers – selected specifically to match the suit, as well – and packed a little woven straw tote bag with the things I needed for poolside: a selection of magazines, some nail polish in case I wanted to do my toes while I laid out, a fluffy pink Egyptian cotton towel, a pack of cigarettes, my iPod and a nice bottle of wine to help me calm down.

I always got a thrilling charge out of walking to the apartment pool in my bikini – even though I had a cover-up in my tote, I opted out of it just so I could enjoy the lingering stares from the men and boys who walked their dogs, took out their garbage or smoked cigarettes on their balconies. I loved hearing the cars behind me slow down to get a longer look at my swiveling ass or my jiggling tits.

I delved well into my third glass of wine and my sixth cigarette, leafing idly through the pages of this month's *InStyle* and coveting a pair of studded patent leather Ferragamo shoes in an advertisement. Suddenly it dawned on me that I felt calm and at peace and a slow smile spread to my lips as the realization that the crisis had passed solidified in my mind. I only just rolled over and started the first lustrous coat of pink enamel on my toenails when my phone rang, almost as if on cue.



I pressed it to my ear and continued my impromptu pedicure. “Hello?”

“Hey, babe,” Will's voice said on the other end.

“Will? I didn't recognize your number. Where are you calling from?” I asked. I felt a familiar feeling in my chest, like a fist closing. It had only been gone from me long enough to be forgotten.

“My battery ran out on me,” Will said. “This is my buddy Chris's phone.”

“What's up?”

“Hey, I got a chance to log on to the internet here at work,” Will told me. “I looked on the website for your apartment complex and they do have bigger places available. There's a two-bedroom and a three-bedroom, both with two bathrooms. It's not a whole lot more than what your rent is, now. We can save a fortune if we're not both paying rent. We could even start saving for a house, y'know?”

“Will, honey, I don't think this is the best time...”

“I know, I know,” Will interrupted, forestalling me. “I have to keep my old place until July when my lease is up, anyway. I just got excited. Can't blame a guy for being happy, right?”

I capped my nail polish, looking at my pedicure blindly and only distractedly wondering how I managed to keep from smearing the topcoat with my hands shaking like they were. “I... I guess not.”

“I'm so glad we're talking about this, baby,” Will told me.

My voice was barely better than a croak. “Will, I...”

“Hang on a second,” he cut in. His voice came back, muffled by his hand as he talked to someone in the room with him.

“Babe, I gotta go,” he said. “They need me at the bar. Talk more later, okay?”

“Okay,” I rasped.

“Love you,” he said.

I said nothing, instead waiting for his picture to fade from my iPhone's screen when the connection died. “I think I'm gonna puke,” I croaked feebly.

No, you're not, the voice assured me. *Get up. Go back to your apartment. Get dressed, and let's get out of here.*

“Go where?” I asked.

The last place you felt safe, I guess, the voice suggested.

“That stupid parking lot, the one we just left?”

Not that stupid, the voice said wryly. *Get in the car. We can figure out what's next from there.*

* * *

You just need to get it off your mind, the not-Jessica voice counseled me gently. *Don't think about it for a little while. Go do something that has nothing to do with Will.*

I sniffled a little, wary of tears which could wreck my carefully-applied makeup. “You’re right,” I said, rummaging in my purse for a cigarette. “We can figure all this shit out later. Right now, what we need – what *I* need, I mean – is to work it out. Get physical.”

I lit my cigarette, shoved the key into the ignition and brought the car to purring life. Slipping it into gear, I pulled out the lonely parking lot where I’d staged my breakdown and headed off into town, towards the haven of my gym. Thankfully, traffic spared me its delays and frustrations and it only took a few minutes of blasting house beats on my sound system and two long, slender cigarettes before I nosed my car into a parking spot in front of my upscale gym. I slung my bag over my shoulder and trotted up the stairs, flashed my ID to the cute brunette at the front desk and pushed my way through the door into the women’s locker room.

Jesus, the voice in my head breathed in satisfied ecstasy. *Shangri-fucking-la.*

I stopped short, looking around. A few moments passed before registering that not-Jessica referred to the milling panoply of semi-nude women threading between the lockers and shower stalls. A long-legged blonde with a spray tan and silicone boobs stretched a kink from her slender back and thrust her chest almost into my face, close enough to see the beaded sweat from her recent workout clinging to the taut, amber skin of her perfect breasts.

I giggled internally, almost feeling the second set of wide, popping eyes inside my own head, gawking at the wanton display of femininity on display in that holiest of holies for a male: the women’s locker room. Add to that the upscale nature of the gym I attended – full of women who could afford the best in cosmetic surgery, trophy wives and dilettantes and heiresses – and it could easily fit into the pages of *Playboy* magazine.

Shockingly, though, I felt a little familiar twinge between my thighs which made me gasp a little.

“Oh my *God*,” I uttered below my breath, speaking to my inner voice. “You’re making me wet.”

Sorry, the voice husked a bit breathlessly. *I didn’t mean... wait. I’m doing this?*

“You have to be,” I replied *sotto voce*. “I don’t have a gay bone in my body. At least this clears up the mystery of why you’re so against makeup and high heels. You have to have been a boy.”

I shouldn't have control like this, not-Jessica said, desire replaced with alarm now. I shouldn't be able to influence your body. Up until now, Jessica, I've only been able to speak to you. Now I'm making you feel things, have biological responses.

“As long as you don't make me eat a half-gallon of cookies and cream ice cream and make my thighs get fat, I'm okay with it,” I whispered, sticking my head in a vacant locker to give myself some privacy for my odd conversation. “It's kinda cool, actually, getting all hot and bothered looking at girls like that. I always wondered if I was missing something, not being into girls. Bet with you helping I could even pull it off. I know a couple bitches at the salon who hit on me all the time.”

Let's talk about something else, not-Jessica said.

“Let's not talk about anything,” I whispered, shucking out of my top and wiggling into the too-tight support of a purple sports bra. “Let's just go sweat.”

* * *

I broke from my normal routine – a method ingrained in me so deeply that the departure actually caused me discomfort – and hit my workout much harder, opening with forty-five solid minutes of high-interval cardio and then a core resistance workout with medicine balls which left me breathless and aching. It pleased me no end that my overall fitness didn't suffer overmuch from my late nights, binge drinking and pack-a-day smoking habit. I had been born a natural athlete – I remembered as much even if not-Jessica did not – and ran track, played soccer, gymnastics and cheered throughout my youth and adolescence. I milled over the memories which seemed to fit and not fit at the same time, remembering the chilly night air and the mercury-vapor lights, the out-of-tune brass band and the smell of cut grass and sweat, standing atop a pyramid of other girls, a bow in my hair and braces on my teeth, wind rustling pom-poms clutched in my fists.

Enough frustration remained to drive me over to the weight rack, craving an upper body workout to leave me exhausted and aching and unable to stress any further about my deteriorating relationship.



I paused to select a pair of hand weights from the rack when I happened to glance up. A man stood at rigid attention, his biceps swelling deliciously as he curled a pair of very heavily laden weights. My eyes traced his luscious, masculine contour from the ground up – thick slabs of tight muscle corded beneath taut flesh on trunkline legs, a trim stomach, broad chest and wide shoulders. My gaze caressed him but verged into the blatant, apparently, since he met my desirous gaze with a twinkle in his brown eyes. The corner of his mouth quirked up into a crooked smile. I subconsciously brushed my hair behind one ear, baring my neck to him – the body language of an aroused and interested woman, I realized distractedly, and gave him a bright, toothy smile. I thanked my makeup and the thick lycra of my sports bra for hiding my telltale blush and the stiffening of my nipples into hot little point voracious for touch. He resumed his workout seamlessly, puffing powerful exhalations through pursed lips which consumed me with a desire to bite.

All thoughts of exhausting myself faded behind a swelling wave of desire. I performed a few cursory upper-body exercises but couldn't keep focused,

my eyes constantly straying back to the bronzed god exercising across the mat from me. He switched from curls to lunges, allowing me a tempting and *supremely* satisfying ogle of his near-perfect posterior and a teasing glimpse of a large, thick member nestled against the inside of his left thigh, forming a *very* interesting swell in the loose fabric of his workout shorts. The perfumed slickness of lipstick cloyed my tongue and I realized I had been licking my lips hungrily. The wetness between my thighs threatened to seep through the thick fabric of my yoga pants (worn, unfortunately, without underwear to keep from embarrassing panty lines). The weights dangled from my hands, forgotten utterly, as I watched him simply move through space.

I lost all track of time, standing motionless making a *complete* fool of myself. My reverie fractured only when the man racked his weights and engaged in a few congratulatory high-fives and shoulder-slaps with some fellow gym-rats, toweling his ruggedly handsome face and brow and breathing deeply. I snapped into motion, turning my back on him as I nervously racked my barely-used weights and blotted the sweat from my own face. I re-tied my ponytail and did some light stretches, making a great show of *not* paying attention and busying myself. I turned around – craving just *one* more teasing look like a junkie for a fix – and my heart sank to realize that he was gone. I scanned the gym and found no trace of him. Saddened, but glad of the timeless moments I got to spend happily eye-fucking him just the same, I wended my slow way back to the locker room. I opted out of a shower, liking the fresh feeling of my honest sweat clinging to my lithe body, and simply remained in my gym clothes for the time being, stuffing my loose off-the-shoulder top and tight pencil skirt back into the locker and heading back out to the overpriced juice bar for a recovery shake before a shower and a change of clothes.

The atmosphere of the “cooling down” areas of the gym differed greatly from the more focused, goal-oriented sections. A relaxed, easy-breathing vibe suffused the air, away from the thump of the pumped-in jock jams on the P.A. and the ceiling-mounted televisions in every line of sight. I walked to the cooler and slid my credit card, selecting my recovery shake of choice – Belgian chocolate – and used my first sip to wash down a large handful of high-dollar supplements which I'd taken from my gym bag earlier. I sat at the table, idly scanning the closed-captioning of one of the 24-hour news networks on one of the many ubiquitous hi-def televisions and letting my body relax one major muscle group at a time, using my cursory knowledge of yoga to try and let my lingering stress flow out of my body. I had only just found the beginnings of a fledgling sense of calm when a deep, mellow *basso* voice made me jump, my heart leaping into my throat.

“Hi,” it said.

I turned in my chair to see the bronzed god from the weight room standing next to me, freshly showered and in dry clothes which did little to mask the chiseled definition of his chest and abdomen. His clean, energetic appearance – freshly gelled hair, even a quick shave – made my once-treasured feel of honest sweat morph suddenly into the feeling of being a stinking, sweaty mess. I touched up hair which was beyond hope in a wild rush of nervous energy.

“Hi,” I replied.

Very suave, not-Jessica teased.

Shut up, I thought back venomously.

“You'll have to excuse me,” the man said with a charming self-deprecating smile. “I don't ever do this. Walk up and start talking to complete strangers like this, I mean. But I, uh... I noticed you looking at me in the weight room.”

Noticed you staring at him like a fat girl at a display case in Dunkin Donuts, not-Jessica teased, obviously enjoying my discomfort and taking full advantage of my internal imbalance.

“Yeah, about that... I'm really sorry,” I forayed lamely. “I don't... I mean, I didn't mean to...”

“I'm Eric,” he said, giving me an out from the morass of awkward monosyllables spewing from me uncontrollably. “Eric Barnes.”

“Uh, hi,” I said with a nervous titter worthy of the most socially inept thirteen-year-old girl. “I'm Jessica. Uh, Cornwell.”

“Oh, like the author,” he said. “Any relation?”

I had no idea to whom he referred, so I only shook my head dumbly, a vapid smile plastered on my face. The silence stretched far into the abyss of discomfort, but Eric persevered.

“Mind if I join you?”

I giggled inanely. *God, what is wrong with me?* “Sure, please.”

“I wish I had just one single reason for coming over,” he said, blushing a little in a way that made my spine go a little gelatinous. “But I guess the main reason was to apologize.”

“Apologize? For what?” I asked.

“I realized I was staring at you,” he said. “I hope I didn't make you uncomfortable.”

“Me? No! Of course not,” I stammered. “I mean – I didn't even really notice.”

Too busy staring at his ass, not-Jessica piped in. I growled mentally in response, and not-Jessica's voice faded to a low buzz in a fit of self-satisfied chuckles.

“I don't see how,” he said. “It's just – well, I don't even know if this is appropriate to say. I haven't done this in a while.”

“Haven't done what?” I asked.

“Talked. To a girl, that is. A woman, I mean. No offense.”

“I find that a little hard to believe,” I told him honestly. I looked down to realize my fingers rested on the corded muscles of his forearm and a tingle like a mild electric shock flowed up my hand. I separated from him abruptly – hoping it didn't look as though I'd scalded my hand in the process – and gave him a wide-eyed smile to divert his attention.

“That I don't talk to women?” he asked with a rich chuckle. “Oh, I did. Once upon a time. But I'm only recently divorced. Married eleven years. My friends have been after me to start breaking the ice and talking to women, but I definitely lost my competitive edge about, oh... let's say eleven years ago.”

I laughed. “You're doing fine,” I reassured him. Without meaning to, I was touching him again – this time, a hand on his divinely-muscled shoulder. Like touching a bunch of bananas with kidskin stretched taut across them. Any more exploration of his physique like this and I felt certain I would be sitting in a puddle.

“You were wondering if something was appropriate to say,” I prompted as he searched for words.

“Oh, right,” he said. “Well, that doesn't really help. Because if it isn't appropriate, then I probably shouldn't say it. But if it is, then I'll kick myself for the rest of the week for not saying it.”

“I don't shock easily,” I told him. “Take a chance.”

“Isn't that what I'm already doing?” he asked self-effacingly, then chuckled at his own chagrin. “Never mind. Appropriate or not, here goes: I was staring because, well, you're easily the most attractive woman I've seen in years. I couldn't really take my eyes off of you, to be honest. And I knew I would never forgive myself if I didn't risk a slow death by shame and come over here to make a fool of myself in front of you.”



“Well, in the spirit of putting cards on the table, I should tell you I was afraid I would creep you out, staring at you the way I did,” I told him.

“You were staring at me?”

“Like a schoolgirl,” I admitted, and the fluttering hummingbirds in my chest seemed to calm a little once it broke into the light. “But for the record, I am *really* glad that you came over to make a fool of yourself.”

“Me, too, surprisingly,” he said. “So, refresh my memory. How do we do this?”

“Simple,” I told him. “We ask each other questions. I’ll even start, just to take the pressure off. What do you do?”

“I work at Mercy Hospital,” he told me.

“You’re a doctor?”

“Surgeon, actually,” he told me. “Cosmetic and reconstructive.”

Oh, heaven help me, he’s a fucking plastic surgeon, too, I near-swooned in my mind. “Wow,” I gushed. “That sounds pretty interesting.”

“Not so much as you’d think,” he told me. “I really like the emergency work. Rebuilding faces and hands and sophisticated stuff like that. But the private practice stuff is pretty boring. Nose jobs and tummy tucks and botox. It keeps the lights on, lets me do the stuff I really love. What about you?”

“Nothing so glamorous as ‘surgeon,’” I said, feeling a bit inadequate. “I’m a stylist.”

“So we have that in common,” he said. “We both make our money helping people feel better about their appearance.”

“I guess so,” I said. “I do like watching the change that comes over somebody when you give them the perfect cut or color. You can change their whole outlook that way. I can only imagine what giving somebody a flat tummy or a big set of knockers would do for them.”

He laughed, a merry rumble emanating deep within his broad chest. “It can be rewarding.”

“Question Two,” I announced. “Where are you from?”

“Here, born and raised.”

“Oh my *God*, me *too!*” I exclaimed. “What high school?”

“Lincoln,” he said.

“Holy shit,” I laughed. “Go Tigers!”

“Small world,” he said. “What do you like to do for fun?”

“I can't really pin it down. I like lots of things – hanging out with friends, I love to dance, I'm learning to cook – but I'm really into new experiences. I'm really digging doing things just because I've never done them before.”

“Anything in particular you're dying to try?” he asked.

Your cock, I thought, covering my lascivious look with, “I've never ridden a horse. And I've always wanted to learn how to play golf. I know it doesn't sound very ambitious.”

“Actually it sounds great,” he told me. “I half-expected to hear crazy things like skydiving or white-water rafting. Bucket list kinds of things. I like your philosophy better.”

“My philosophy?” I prompted.

“Keep it simple. Start with the things that arouse your curiosity. The bigger stuff – it's not going anywhere. Why stuff yourself if you don't have the appetite. Go with what interests you.”

“I never thought of it like that,” I said. “I thought I was just lame.”

“Hardly,” he said. “Look, just walking over here and saying 'hi' was plenty of adrenaline for me. I can wait before I bungee jump or go paraskiing.”

“It's going really well, in case you're wondering,” I offered.

“Nice to know,” he said with a smile.

God, could this guy be any more charming? not-Jessica piped up. *Any more of this stuff, and I'm gonna want to fuck him.*

You better, I warned mentally. *Because that is so gonna happen.*

“What about you?” I asked. “What do you do for fun?”

“I read a lot – it's kind of my weakness – and I have recently taken up mountain biking. I have a younger sister with Down's Syndrome and we spend our Saturdays together. And if you wanted, I could help you scratch golf off your list. I know, I know – stereotypical doctor, right, always on the golf course. But I really enjoy the game.”

“You want to take me golfing?” I asked.

He took in a deep, steadying breath. “I would *adore* taking you golfing.”

“I don't have any clubs or anything,” I said. “And I've only played putt-putt before this.”

“You can rent clubs, and everyone has to start somewhere,” he said.

“So, um... are you asking me out?”

“I guess I am,” he admitted. “Is that okay?”

I grinned, the first genuine-and-not-flummoxed smile I'd offered him since he sat down. “More than okay,” I told him, putting my hand over his own. “I'm thrilled. I would *love* to go golfing with you.”

“How's Sunday? I'm pretty sure I can get a tee time at my club.”

“Sunday is perfect,” I replied. “How does it work? I mean, is it morning? Afternoon?”

“It can be whenever you'd like,” he told me.

“Well, I was thinking maybe we could grab a bite or something beforehand,” I offered, suddenly intoxicated with the idea of spending huge amounts of time with him.

“That would be fantastic,” he said, sounding a little bit surprised. “I know a place on the way that makes the best omelets I've ever eaten. Should we meet there, say, around nine-thirty?”

I nodded, and grabbed the phone he'd placed on the table when he sat down in a rush, keying in my phone number and sliding it back across the tabletop towards him. “You can text me the directions,” I said. “Or call me. Whichever you prefer.”

He pressed 'send' and my own phone vibrated loudly on the table next to my elbow. “Now you have my number, as well,” he said. “Call me if anything changes.”

“What if I just want to talk to you?”

“What about?” he asked.

I sensed a subtle shift in the dynamic between us – he truly had forgotten how to do this and now looked to me for guidance – and took full advantage. “Well, Sunday is five days from now,” I explained. “What if, for instance, I didn't want to wait that long to see you again and maybe wanted to meet you for drinks or something?”

His smile betrayed honest surprise. “You'd do that?”

“I would so do that,” I told him, caressing his hand with my own and leveling unmistakable eye contact at him, broadcasting my attraction directly at him in a way not even his inexperience could misinterpret. “As a matter of fact, if you wouldn't mind walking me to my car, I might show you a few *other* things I might do.”

* * *

I had only intended – honestly – to make out with him. He seemed a bit charmingly old-fashioned, so much so that I feared coming across as too forward. Something told me my usual head-on approach – which many of my friends typefied as 'slutty' – would turn him off. But the first tender little kiss, as gentle as a feather touch across my lips, paved the way for my hands to trace the chiseled outlines of his muscles beneath his smooth skin, which in turn fueled an ardor which overwhelmed all good sense. I pushed him against the side of a parked car in the underground lot and thoroughly mauled him, sucking on his tongue and lower lip, nibbling his earlobes, running my hands all over his body.

We parted suddenly, both breathless and heaving, leaning against the car for balance since my knees no longer seemed to be functioning properly. “Maybe we should slow down,” he offered.

My hands never stopped, rubbing his abdomen and feeling the washboard bumps of his six-pack beneath his shirt, as I nuzzled his neck. “I can't,” I panted.

“What does that mean?”

“It means that you are *the* most attractive man I have ever met,” I said, peppering his neck and jawline with little baby kisses as my fingers found his stiffened male nipples beneath the fabric and teased them with my long fingernails. “There is no way – *no* way – for me to keep my hands off of you.”

“But we're in the middle of a parking lot,” he said, his excuses becoming more and more feeble as my hands warmed him to the idea of physical contact.

“Where's your car?” I asked him.

“About two rows over,” he replied. “You really want to make out in the back seat, like high school?”

“Back seat, front seat, hood, trunk,” I breathed, squeezing his ass. “Just take me there.”

He led me to a nondescript SUV and opened the drivers' side door, leaning across while muttering something about cleaning off the front seat so I could sit there. He straightened to see me standing in front of him, breasts bare from shucking my compressing sports bra, nipples stiff, pink and proud.

“Oh my God,” he breathed.

“Lay back,” I instructed in a throaty purr.

“You're sure?” he asked.

“Baby, I have never met a man I wanted to do this for more than you,” I said, my fingers working expertly on his fly. “Now, quit being such a gentleman for a second and let me scandalize you.”



He kissed me one last time as I freed his cock – his very large, very thick, very gorgeous cock – from its confines and stroked it gently with the tips of my manicure. Without any further conversation, I sank to my haunches beside his open door and slid it between my slick lips, sliding it into my throat until I almost gagged. I noticed with great satisfaction that a good three or four inches still remained outside my mouth. Knowing that I could easily engulf my current boyfriend's meager five inches, the quick addition in my head yielded a *very* pleasing number.

I gave in to my basest urges in a rush, delivering possibly the wettest, moaningest, sloppiest porn-star blowjob of my young life – enough to stun not-Jessica into awed silence for the duration – which caused Eric's eyes alternate between screwing shut in ecstasy and gazing down at me in utter amazement. I licked his entire length like a divine popsicle, teased his balls with my tongue, thrilled him with long, twisting strokes of my hand, pistoned my head up and down, rubbed his cock across my face while whispering dirty little endearments, even 'pierced' my cheek with it. I even surprised myself not only with my actions but my complete willingness – even abandon – to perform them. Even to the point that when his own grunts began to form the rising arpeggio of pleasure, I did not do as I usually did and switch solely to my hands. Instead, I pushed him deeper down my throat. All my young life, I'd been a 'spit' girl. Not with Eric. For Eric, I'd be a 'swallow' girl. I'd be anything he wanted me to be. More than that. I *wanted* – desperately – to be anything he wanted me to be.

He spasmed beneath me and thrust upwards – gently, but insistently – and I tensed for the acrid, bitter taste to fill my mouth. I gave in to Will's pleading once, long ago, and took his orgasm in my mouth only to find the taste nearly made me vomit, so harsh and ammoniac it was. I expected the same, but the pleasant mellow surprise filled my mouth instead. It was still bitter, but the musky quality of him appealed to me, tasting more like wood-smoke or even roasted brazil nuts than I expected. I had no trouble swallowing every drop of his release, even to the point of licking the little bits which oozed out after his orgasm ended and his magnificent cock began to deflate.

“Oh, my God,” he breathed. “That... that was...”

I smiled at him. “I know,” I replied. “For me, too.”

He shocked me once again by leaning in to kiss me deeply, completely unfazed by the traces of his cum which clung to my lips and tongue. “You. You are amazing,” he told me.

“Likewise,” I said. Trying to pull my sodden sports-bra back on proved to be an impossibility, so I pulled out the teal off-the-shoulder top from my gym bag – conveniently dropped beside the car and quite forgotten in my passion – and pulled it over my naked torso. My nipples still formed tantalizing tents in the sheer fabric.

“So, I know you're a doctor, so you're probably going to bitch at me, but...” I said, placing a cigarette between my lips and averting my gaze to blunt the inevitable lecture as I fumbled with my matches.

He shrugged. “You are, I assume, older than eighteen?”

“Yes,” I said.

“And you're well aware that they are bad for you, and can make you sick?”

“Yes,” I replied.

“Then apparently you're a grown woman who can make up her own mind,” he said. “Besides, you have to have one vice. Otherwise you'd be perfect and I wouldn't be able to relate to you.”

I smiled through a softly unfolding plume of slate-grey smoke. “You do know what to say to a girl, don't you?”

“Are you sure you don't want me to, um... return the favor?” he asked, gesturing slightly with his head towards my swollen, damp crotch.

I licked my lips. “No, I want to leave a few things to the imagination,” I told him. “Tease myself a little. So when you *do*, y'know, 'return the favor,' I'll probably go off like a Roman candle the second you touch me.”

He blushed. “And to think, all I had to do was walk over and say 'hi,’” he mused.

I kissed his cheek. “So, tell me,” I said. “This golf course you're taking me to. Are there any nice hotels or stuff like that nearby?”

“Depends. There's the motel-type stuff, and a Holiday Inn Express or something about a mile away,” he said, “but if you wanted to drive a bit further into the country, there are a couple of really nice, secluded bed-and-breakfasts near the lake, if that's your thing.”

“That sounds nice,” I told him. “Book us a room at one of them.”

He smiled broadly. “Sounds wonderful.”

* * *

My head swam in delight and amazement as I essentially drove in circles, too infatuated and self-satisfied to pay much attention to the road or my surroundings. I could not keep the idiotic, cream-in-whiskers smile off of my face and could hardly last a minute before drifting into another lovely daydream of intense, passionate sex with Eric in any number of locales, positions or iterations.

All the things I did to him. All the things I *wanted* to do to him. All the things I never *considered* doing to Will.

Will.

Oh, shit. *Will*. I just cheated on my boyfriend.

The bubble of overjoyed contentment burst, leaving only the cold squeezing fist of stress in my chest, the self-same problem I went to the gym to alleviate in the first place. My smile faded and a sullen resentment built inside me. Damn him, anyway. Damn Will for taking away my good mood. Damn him for trying to bully me into long-term commitment when I so *obviously* wasn't ready. Damn him for not having a cock like Eric's. Damn him for all of it.

Not-Jessica was right. Something had to be done.

I lit a cigarette – more to procrastinate pulling my phone from my purse for just a few more seconds, to put off the inevitable – and then dialed Will's number on my pink iPhone and pressed it to my ear. It rang for several seconds before he finally picked up. The loud, incessant thump of the overblown bar music thundered in the background, making me raise my voice to be heard.

“Hey, Will, it's me,” I told him.

“Hey, baby,” he shouted. “Found a phone charger that fits mine.”



“That's awesome,” I said dismissively. “Hey, Will, we need to talk, okay?”

“Sounds serious. What's up?”

“Not here. I don't want to have to shout to be heard. Meet me after work at Claudio's,” I told him.

“Claudio's? Wow. Kinda ritzy, ain't it?” he asked.

“Feel like ritzy,” I told him, not sure why I picked the upscale outdoor Italian café. “Just meet me there, okay? We can talk then.”

“Okay, sounds good,” he said. “I'll call you when we close.”

“Okay,” I said, tapping the 'End' button with a manicured thumbnail to avoid the uncomfortable 'I love you' which would no doubt append the conversation. I tried to lose myself in thoughts of Eric once again, but with no luck. I only seemed able to focus on the unpleasant task remaining to me.

MY HEAD SWAM WITH CONFLICTING emotions as I slipped my phone back into my purse. I alternated between elation at my new, promising relationship and the stale, stressful old one, interspersed with feelings of self-loathing now that I struggled to accept my role as *the cheating girlfriend*. Oddly, the fact that I had just dropped to my knees and blown a total stranger in a parking lot like a common whore did not bother me in the least.

I blinked hot tears from my eyes – glad of my choice of waterproof mascara this morning – and pulled into a public park, afraid that I would get into an accident trying to drive in my current state. The waning day offered very pleasant weather, at least, a balmy eighty degrees and very little humidity with a cool breeze drifting in from the west. Children and parents walked dogs and flew kites in little knots of humanity scattered across the green park. I climbed from my car and forced myself to breathe in the fresh air, beating back my stress and discomfiture until I could sort out the tangled knot of thoughts and feelings strafing my consciousness.

“Are you even in there?” I whispered to myself hoarsely, calling out for the alien not-Jessica consciousness which had so inexplicably turned up in my life a few days prior.

Of course I'm here, the voice answered inside my mind.

“Good,” I croaked. “Cause I really don't want to be alone right now.”

Understandable, not-Jessica replied.

“I could really use your help,” I muttered.

Sounds like it, the voice said kindly, warming me. *How about a little walk? Clear our head.*

“Our' head?”

I'm in here, too, not-Jessica explained. *Like it or not.*

“Relax, sweetheart,” I chided softly. “Turns out, I *do* like it.”

I slid back into my driver's seat and rummaged for a second in my gym bag. My groping encounter with Eric in the parking lot and my lack of a post-workout shower had my off-the-shoulder top sodden and clinging to me, showing nipples still stiff with the memory of Eric's rock-hard body and generous cock beneath my lips and fingers. My pussy ached with unsatisfied lust – made so on purpose, but maddening nonetheless. I took a moment to slip into a clean top, a simple heather-gray tank which left my

flat belly bare, and scoop my damp hair into a loose, high ponytail. Slinging my purse over one shoulder, I set off down one of the various cinder trails leading down into the trees near the creek which bisected the park.

You seem a little bit calmer, not-Jessica mentioned.

“I guess I am,” I replied. “I think just knowing you were there.”

You depend an awful lot on other people, the voice commented. You should rely on yourself a little more. You're stronger than you think, Jessica.

I sniffled. “That's really sweet,” I told the voice. “But you can't tell me you never relied on someone else. Everybody needs people in their lives.”

I didn't say otherwise, the voice countered, a little heat in its mental tone. I'm just saying that you should try a little harder to stand on your own two feet when times are tough. Nobody wants that needy girl around.

“You're talking about Eric,” I said.

I guess. Among others. But it doesn't make it any less true.

“You sound sad,” I told the inner voice.

I suppose so, not-Jessica replied.

“We're in this together,” I prompted. “What's up?”

That little dig about having people in your life, the voice said hesitantly. It stung a little.

“Sorry,” I said.

I know you didn't mean anything by it, the voice went on. But it just drove something home.

“Drove what home?”

Here I am, right? Stuck in the head of a young girl. From my perspective, I woke up one morning in another body. Turns out the body came with a personality, and a history, and an attitude all its own. I guess that's good – I wouldn't have been able to function as a woman, otherwise. But it's like I'm not in control of my own life any more. Like I'm just a spectator. I just had to watch – and feel, and smell, and taste – my body suck the dick of another man when I'd never had a homosexual thought in my life. And

even though the act, or even the thought of performing the act, didn't disgust me or repel me, I never would have imagined doing it. Then you have to add to that the fact that the body I occupy – or at least the one I cohabit – enjoyed the hell out of sucking that dick. The feelings – Jesus, how do you not climb the walls? – running through me should have made my cock so hard a cat couldn't scratch it. But I don't even get that familiarity to fall back on. No, I get a feeling like I wet myself and this yawning fucking emptiness between my legs. Nipples like iron. And as good as it all feels, it's not me. None of this is supposed to beme.

“But it is you. Now,” I said.

Jessica, you have always felt this way. None of this is unique for you. You're walking. Just walking along, like you've done since your first steps. Do you know how weird and alien feeling those boobs jiggle on my chest is to me? That sexy little wiggle in your ass, which is nothing to you other than your natural stride, makes me feel like we're going to fall over at any moment? Even that little tug on our head, from our ponytail swishing back and forth. All of this is the first time I've ever felt these things.

My chin dimpled, fresh tears welling. “You must be so lonely.”

Well, that's the kicker, the voice explained. I have a friend. A best friend. Someone I could tell all of this. Someone who would pat me on the shoulder and give me good advice and tell me I was strong enough to pull through. Someone who could remind me of my own strength and intelligence and stamina and tell me everything would work out in the end.

“Is this someone we could go see?” I asked.

It's someone we see every day, the voice replied forlornly. As a matter of fact, he's the reason you're so stressed out. You just cheated on him with another man.

“Will? He's your best friend?”

Was. I don't think we qualify any more.

“Oh, God,” I breathed, covering my mouth with steepled fingers. “All this time, I've been hating on him and you've had to listen to me bitch and complain and talk about what an asshole he is...”

It's not that, not-Jessica consoled me. I could've told you from the get-go what a disaster he is with women. He and I have been friends for years. He always pushes too hard and it always blows up in his face. He'd fall in

love with the woman of his dreams every fucking Thursday and be convinced that she was the woman he was going to marry and have a house full of kids with. And he would hit the gas way too hard and she would get scared and then get sick of him after a month or two. Then he'd drink himself stupid for a while, and then he'd meet the next girl of his dreams and it would start all over again.

I giggled. “That does sound like Will.”

I always liked that about him, though. For one thing, being a serial monogamist and not just a player – I respect that. A guy with his looks could easily be a user, one of those intolerable fuck-'em-and-forget-'em types. And I always found that 'wear your heart on your sleeve' thing to be endearing. Until I had to experience it first-hand. But none of that is what bothers me. Even having his cock somewhere inside my abdomen repeatedly didn't bother me as much as I thought it would. Feels pretty good, actually.

“Then what is it?”

It's not being able to say, 'Hey. Will. It's me. Jeff. I know I have boobs and long blonde hair, but I swear to God, it's me, man. We got detention in Mrs. Kendrick's chemistry class in the tenth grade for making cherry bombs and blowing up the sink.' Just being able to tell my best friend that I'm not gone. Hell, I don't even know if he remembers me. I don't know if anyone remembers me.

“I remember you,” I offered. “And these last couple days – well, you've become my best friend.”

I feel like that, too, the voice said. But it's not exactly the same. Maybe I didn't explain it right.

“No, you did fine,” I said, brightening a little. “Listening to you like that – it dawned on me that all those little stories about Will you have, I don't have any of those. We were never close like that. We don't have the history.”

Yeah, not-Jessica said.

“Have you ever wondered why you and I are separate?” I asked him – I thought of not-Jessica as *him* now, although I still struggled with thinking of him as 'Jeff.' “I mean, however the hell this happened to us, why two separate personalities in one body?”

Yeah, I've wondered that, not-Jessica said.

“That's just it. History,” I went on. “It just occurred to me. I've always thought that I was the one in control. That this was *my* life and you just popped up inside it. But look at my phone. Lots and lots of people that I know, but not one single one I can call a friend. Try as I might, I can't remember anything that happened before two months ago. Nothing, not even where I got my cosmetology certificate. I mean, it's up on my wall at the salon, and it says Baldwin Beauty Academy, but I don't remember going there and I don't remember graduating. I had to have Will tell me how we met. I can drive a car, but I don't ever remember getting my license. I must have had parents – I have a belly button, so I wasn't grown in a lab or anything – and there are pictures of me with them in my apartment, but I can't for the life of me remember where those pictures got taken. I swear I don't think I've ever met either of those people. If it wasn't for the picture, I would walk right past them on the street.

“All I am is a set of skills, I think,” I went on. “Stuff you needed to get by. You needed a job, so boom. I automatically know how to do hair and makeup. Whatever made us like this, well, it decided you needed the basics of how to function as a girl. How to suck a dick and walk in heels and put in a tampon and apply mascara. Somehow, I took on a life of my own and you got pushed into the background. You're what I need to be complete. You're all the history.”

That can't be true, not-Jessica said. I know there's more to you than that. You have thoughts and feelings and opinions of your own. I know you do. We argue, for Chrissakes.

“Can't you argue with yourself? Don't you wrestle with your own subconscious?” I countered. “I think that's all you. I'm just the autopilot.”

I can't accept that, not-Jessica said.

“Okay, then, smarty-pants, why am I not upset?” I asked. “I just came to the realization that I do not have an independent personality of my own. That I'm just a robot that cuts hair and gives blowjobs. Don't you think, if that weren't true, that I would be *super* pissed about it?”

I... I don't...

“See? That *has* to be it,” I said triumphantly. “I'm the skills you need to function as a girl. You're the history I need to be real. We need each other.”

But that would mean that you – the you that's talking, the you that's falling out of love with Will and falling in love with Eric...

“Is you. You're doing the talking. You're ending a relationship with Will and you...”

I'm falling in love with Eric.

“Yep,” I said.

This is heavy.

“Yep,” I repeated.

And you're okay with this?

“Yep,” I giggled.

Then do me a favor.

“Name it,” I said.

Stop thinking of me as “not-Jessica” any more, okay?

A warm, happy smile spread across my face. “You got it, *Jessica*.”

* * *

I – we – walked further through the park, a circuit of around two miles, just looking at things for what seemed like the first time. The cool breeze felt better, somehow, and the wildflowers smelled sweeter. That jiggle on my chest felt natural, now. No longer alien, just *new*. New and wonderful.

I stopped to pet a small dog being walked by a cute teenage boy when my phone *dinked* in my pocket. I dug it out and viewed my recent texts. I saw Eric's name and my heart skipped a beat.

Turns out u were right

My thumbs tapped the screen: **Bout what?**

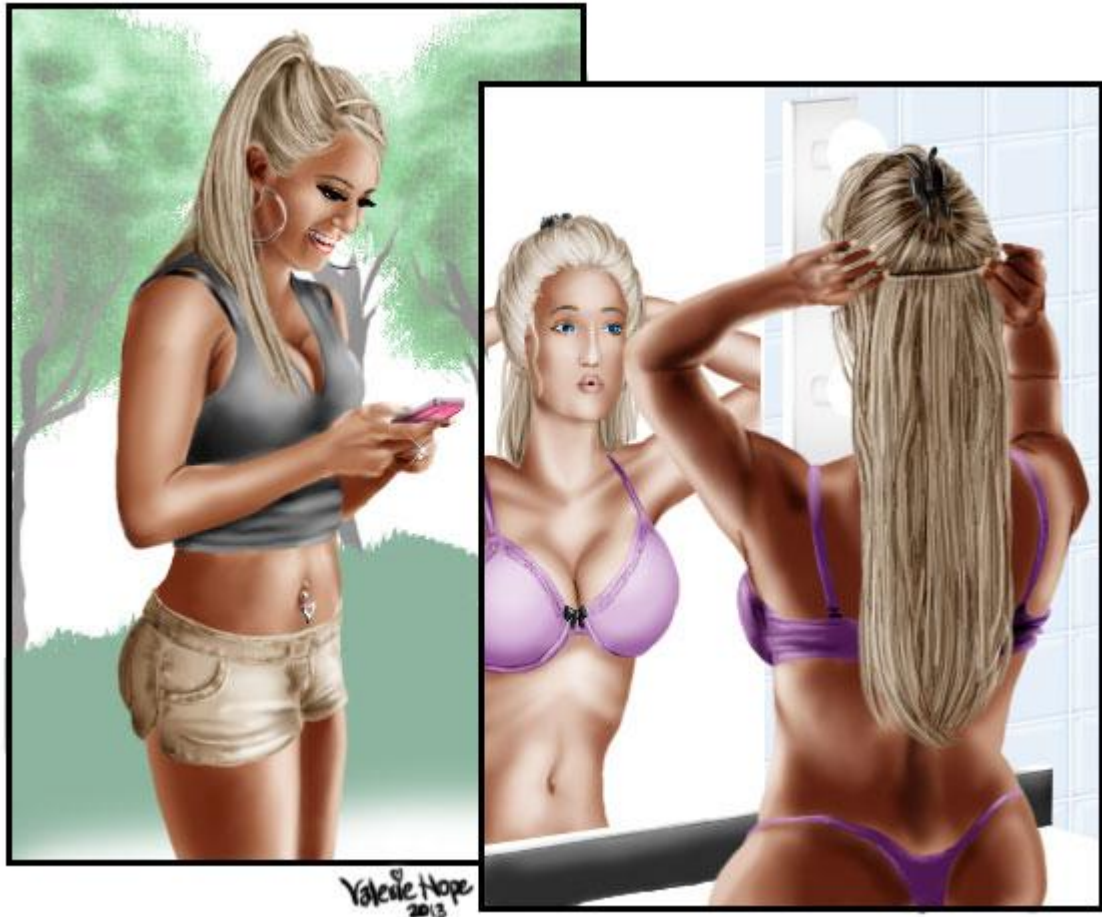
Sunday is too long 2 wait. Can I see u tonight?

I bit my bottom lip in consternation. My heart trilled in my chest at the thought of seeing him again. Memories of touching him and being close to him, inhaling his scent, flooded me and gave me intense feelings of arousal, attraction, warmth and safety. Every instinct in my body screamed “yes!” but I knew I had to face Will. I had to break it off with him. But the

practical part of my brain rebelled. *There is no reason I can't do both. I have to deal with Will, but I want to be with Eric.*

I have stuff 2 do early but we could meet l8r, I replied quickly.

When when when? he texted back to me almost immediately.



I couldn't keep the delighted smile from my face. To have someone like me as much as I liked them... intoxicating. I texted back: **Meet me @ Claudios around 10**

My mind immediately shifted gears – as naturally as breathing – and began mentally sorting through the clothes in my closet at home, considering and discarding various outfits in rapid succession, questing after the perfect look, the one which would leave Eric's mouth gaping open and his thoughts geared only to peeling every stitch of it off of me later and ravishing me until my legs went weak. I rushed home, all thoughts of stress and discomfort forgotten, racing into the shower and then seating myself in front of my vanity wearing only my underwear and starting the long process of

putting on my face and doing my hair. I wanted to be perfect for Eric – the girl from the centerfold, flawless in every way. A dim part of me remembered the way it felt to see a girl like that and it translated through the rest of me as an intense desire to *be* that girl and *cause* those feelings. I decided to go full-out glam and began clipping in my scandalously expensive set of hair extensions to give my hair extra length and body.

Two hours passed by as I systematically perfected myself. I plucked every errant hair which marred the perfect arch of each eyebrow, moisturized every dry patch of skin and evened out every small variation in color with sponge, foundation and concealer. I spent at least ten minutes with a tiny brush applying the perfect 'smoky eye' and glued on fake eyelashes to dramatize the look. My hands knew exactly what to do as they teased my augmented hair and transformed my face into a work of art.

Another hour sank into the selection of just the perfect lingerie. I needed undergarments that did not spoil the line of the dress I'd chosen but still would serve to excite Eric when he undressed me. I chose a push-up bra in black satin with rhinestone trim which shoved my breasts together into a mouthwatering cleft, a matching g-string thong and stay-up thigh-high stockings with lace tops. I had to do the girlish 'shimmy' to squeeze myself into the second-skin cocktail dress for the evening, black with red chevron stripes all in sequins, clinging lovingly to my every tempting curve. I stepped up into a pair of black platform pumps with a 6" heel – *the higher the heel, the better I feel*, I giggled to myself as I acclimated to the change in perspective of being once again six feet tall.

I selected a black leather clutch and stuffed in keys, wallet, phone and cigarettes as well as my go-to emergency makeup repair kit and hustled out the door as quickly as I could without tottering on my towering heels. The *clack-clock-clack* of the heels on the concrete outside my door registered as a happy sound to my ears for the first time, no longer foreign and unsettling but now associated with feeling sexy, pretty and self-assured.

As my fingers turned the key in the ignition of my car, the realization broke through that I had not thought once about Will, never felt a moment's stress or consternation.

I'd never felt more certain of what I had to do.

* * *

Armed with self-assurance borne of being far and away the most breathtaking woman in the small *ristorante* and with the inner calm of

knowing that breaking up with Will would be the best thing for us both, I sipped a glass of house chardonnay and smoked a cigarette next to the fountain – a fountain that seemed eerily familiar to me, and strangely comforting at the same time – while I waited for Will to arrive. He caught sight of me as he passed on the sidewalk and his eyes widened in appreciative lust at how I looked. Even though he was on the outs, I still got the little tingling charge. But then, I'd been getting that charge from every man who caught a glimpse of me that night.

He made his way in from the street and found his way onto the little back patio next to the fountain where I waited. He had changed from his work togs – jeans and a t-shirt with the name of the bar silkscreened on the front – into a dress shirt and loose-fitting suit. He had even styled his hair.

“Hey, baby,” he told me as he walked up. “You look *amazing*.”

“Thanks,” I said graciously, sipping my wine. “And you look very handsome yourself.”

“Yeah, I guess this turned into an occasion on us,” he laughed a little bit nervously. He gestured to a passing waiter and ordered a beer as I finished my cigarette and ground it out in a nearby ashtray. Awkward silence stretched between us.

“I was really glad when you said you wanted to talk,” he said, finally breaking the stillness. “I have something I wanted to talk to you about, too.”

“Maybe I should...” I began, but he forestalled me with an upraised hand.

“I kinda need to get this out, if you don't mind, Jess,” he said a little breathlessly. “I've been rehearsing this over and over in my head, and nothing ever seemed quite right, y'know? So I guess I should just man up and just spit it out. Here goes. Jessica, sweetheart, you know how much I love you. More than anything. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Marry me.” A ring in a velvet box had appeared in his hands from an inside pocket. My breath caught in my throat and I covered my mouth. Even knowing he felt that way, to be asked... it caught me entirely by surprise.



“Well?” he asked. “What do you think? Want to get married?”

I looked him in the eyes and took a deep breath. “No,” I said.

He paused, scarcely breathing, eyes locked to mind. “No?” he repeated numbly.

“Will, I care about you. I really do. But I can’t marry you,” I explained.

“Why not?” His voice was very small and lost. My heart ached, a sudden pang, but I kept strong.

“You have to understand, Will, baby – it’s not that you’re not a good person. It really isn’t.”

“So it’s not me, it’s you?” he said with a sudden spasm of bitterness.

“No, it’s *us*. We don’t work. Why can’t you see that? I’m not happy in this relationship. I haven’t been, not for a long time. I tried to tell you, and you’d try for a little while and things would get a little better but then you’d quit trying and everything would go back to the way it was.”

“So I wasn't a good boyfriend?”

“Only every once in a while,” I told him honestly, hating the pain that flashed across his handsome face. “But it was never consistent. Never permanent. We have way too many problems, Will, and that...” I pointed to the little diamond ring nestled in its box between his fidgeting hands “...is not going to solve them.”

I put a hand on his shoulder. He flinched a little. “You're a good friend,” I told him. Seeing his face screw up in pain and bitterness again, I forestalled him quickly. “I mean it. It's been what kept me in this relationship for as long as I have. You're a great friend. I've treasured it. I don't want you to think it's all been bad, because it hasn't. I *do* love you, Will. You've been there for me so often, and there's nothing I couldn't or wouldn't tell you or do for you.”

“Great,” he muttered, snapping the jewelry box shut and stuffing it back in his jacket. “Friended.”

“You're selling yourself short,” I told him. “You want the honest truth?”

“I haven't had it yet?” he spat.

“Anybody can fuck me,” I told him hotly, sick of his vengefulness. “Anybody can take me out on dates or move into my apartment. Boyfriends are a dime a dozen. You were the one who did the hard work. You were the one who took the time and went to the trouble and became a friend. I don't have a lot of friends. I'm ten times as grateful to you for that than for any of the other stuff. Your friendship meant more to me – *means* more to me – than the rest of it, all put together.”

He coughed, covering what might have been tears, and scrubbed a hand roughly across his face. “So, why did you take it so much further, when friendship was all you wanted? Why did you let me believe it could be more than that?”

“Because I thought it might be more than that, too,” I told him. “I was wrong.”

“I don't think you were,” he argued.

“Baby, I've given you so many opportunities to change it. Over and over again. Nothing ever sticks. I wanted it to change. I kept telling myself I could make a go of this if it would only change. But you are who you are.

And I'm who I am. We can't just exist in our natural states and have any hope at all of lasting together as a couple," I said in a rush.

The words of my inner Jessica – the voice which had fought me at first but gradually come to take me over, so that the emotions in my heart were now that person's emotions and the thoughts in my head that person's thoughts – came back to me, about Will being a best friend and a cornerstone in my life. A sudden longing filled me, an ache to have my best friend back. Someone I could talk to, confide in, who would share my happiness and my heartbreak. Someone who would be thrilled to hear I'd met someone who set me on fire inside and want all the sordid details.

"I wish you could see how much more valuable you are as a friend than a lover," I said softly. "I wish you could be satisfied as my best friend."

Something glittered in the corner of my eye, drawing my vision. The babbling fountain next to us, overlaying our intense conversation with its roaring laugh, held something in its shallow pool, something which gleamed and shimmered in the city lights.

I peered closer. On the bottom of the shallow pool, perched amidst the scattered coins... it looked like an engagement ring. But who would toss a diamond ring into a fountain?

"I wish you could be my best friend again," I whispered.



Will, eyes downcast, leaned heavily against the stone basin of the fountain, fighting tears. As I watched, he seemed to take on a shimmer of his own, somehow – glittering in pulses in time to the ring in the pool. Not sure I even saw what I saw, he seemed to shift, somehow. His face softened, going from rugged to smooth. The nose narrowed and elongated, the cheekbones lifted. His eyebrows drew in on themselves, from bushy and bold to delicate and arched. His wide, dimpled chin narrowed and became elfin and smooth as his thin lips plumped into lush, kissable splendor. His hair, normally gelled into a trendy little tuna fin, began to sprout visibly, tumbling down his face and over his shoulders into a lustrous fall of sable brown with auburn streaks. The wide, muscular shoulders narrowed and the thick torso collapsed into a petite, compact trunk as high, pert breasts swelled on his chest. His backside, thick and muscular, tucked up and pouted out into a delectable little feminine bubble as his legs and arms thinned and tapered into willowy, lithe sinuosity. His fingernails extended like cats' claws, forming square-filed, long and glamorous extensions to his lissome fingers. The coarse hair on his arms, legs and chest paled and

retracted to invisibility, leaving only creamy, smooth and unblemished skin behind.

As I watched, the long filed nails disappeared beneath several coats of expertly applied lacquer as flawlessly done evening makeup – complete with false eyelashes like my own and a thick coat of glossy lipstick which matched the nail polish – appeared on her delicate face. Huge brown eyes, now devoid of tears, looked at me as if nothing odd were happening, while the dress shirt and suit slid and retracted like liquid across the now slender, feminine body into a skin-tight little ruched red cocktail dress and large silvery hoop earrings appeared from thin air to dangle from his lobes and a five-row rhinestone choker coalesced from nothing to clasp tight around a slender, lissome neck.

“What?” he asked me in a high soprano voice. “Why are you staring at me like that?”

“I, uh... I don't...”

A high, infectious giggle escaped the plump lips, which drew back in a generous smile to reveal even, chalk-white teeth. “God, you're such a fucking airhead sometimes, Jessica,” once-Will chided, giving me a gentle and playful push. “You totally forgot what you were gonna say again, didn't you?”

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I was holding. “Yeah,” I said with a snort. “I guess I did.”

The waiter – summoned much earlier with an order for a beer, but now returning with two more glasses of chardonnay on a tray – appeared and handed us our drinks. once-Will offered that glittering smile as the waiter's eyes wandered across her tight, trim body appreciatively before returning to work.

“Cute,” once-Will commented, watching the waiter's backside as hungrily as the waiter had viewed his – *her* – own. “Wonder if he's single?”

He – *she* – sipped the wine and eyed me appraisingly. “Y'know, if we keep sucking down all this wine I'm gonna have to take it on your ass in the gym on Monday. Way too many empty calories.”

“You're... what,” I stammered, still awestruck. “You're my personal trainer?”

once-Will snorted and stuck out his – *her* – tongue, pierced by a silver stud. “Yeah, that’s it. I’m *just* your personal trainer. What the fuck is with you tonight, Jess? You’re looking at me like you never even met me, and I’ve been your best friend since the fourth grade!”

“Best friend?”

“Duh,” she said. “Earth to Jessica: remember me? Stephanie Reilly? Ring any bells?”

Stephanie Reilly. Memories flooded into me from an unknown source, pouring into my skull like water from the fountain beside me. Stephanie Reilly. We sat next to each other in Mrs. Hobbs' homeroom. We both liked the same boy – Ricky Wright – and we almost came to blows over him before we discovered that he liked his Hot Wheels cars far more than he liked either of us. We became friends from that moment on. We slept over at each others' houses, we cheered together all through school, we were in the drama club together. The girl who I carried home on my back when she fell off her bike and broke her leg when we were twelve. I used to change into my slutty “going out” clothes in her garage so my parents wouldn't criticize how I was dressed. She was the one I called the night I lost my virginity and she was the one who lay next to me on my bed, arms wrapped around me tightly, while I cried over my first broken heart. Stephanie Reilly. The girl who taught me how to give head to a dill pickle. We dared each other and got our bellybuttons pierced together at Cheerleading Nationals in Daytona. I was her very first client when she got her personal trainer's license and had been working with her for six years and she'd never charged me a dime – no more than I charged her for cutting and highlighting her hair every month.

History.

I smiled, feeling her suddenly nestle into my life and fill all the gaps snugly and completely. “Sorry,” I said, so happy to see her and be near her that I could scarcely talk. “Don't know where my head went, there, for a second.”

“It's that blonde hair,” she teased.

“Like, um, whatever,” I giggled, twisting a strand of it around my finger and rolling my eyes comically.

“So, what were you so excited to tell me about?” she prompted.

I dug in my purse for a cigarette, then unexpectedly offered one to her. “Not drunk enough yet,” she told me, holding up a hand, and I immediately

remembered she didn't start smoking my cigarettes until she'd downed at least her third glass of wine. At least she always bought me a pack afterwards to make up for it.

“So, I wanted to tell you – I met somebody,” I said.

“Oh my *God*, look at your face!” she gushed, laughing and tipping my chin up with one finger. “Holy shit, Jessica, you're *totally* in love! Look at you!”

I blushed. “Yeah,” I told her softly. “I really think I am, Steph.”

“Is it wonderful?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said, nodding, bright tears of happiness glittering in my eyes.

She gestured wildly for the cute waiter she'd been eye-fucking earlier.

“Fuck this wine shit,” she said roughly, chugging the rest of her glass like a frat boy. “We're getting some fucking champagne for this! Now dish, girl. I want every little detail. What's his name?”

I grinned happily. “Eric. And he's the reason I told you to meet me here. He's coming by here in a couple hours. I want you to meet each other.”

“Getting the Bestie Seal of Approval?” she teased, and I nodded. She radiated satisfaction, and I remembered in one of those flashes that she and I had been running potential boyfriends past one another like this since high school. I wouldn't even consider dating someone that Stephanie thought was bad for me. I'd dumped guys for that reason alone, I recalled.

“So, where did you meet his guy?” Stephanie urged.

“Well, I went to the gym...”

“Without me?”

“Yeah, I was just stressed. Don't even remember why. I just needed to let off some steam. Well, I was working on the hand weights when I saw this guy...”

I puffed on my cigarette and opened my purse to drop in my lighter, forgotten in my hand, when I noticed the pink iPhone nestled inside. As the waiter approached, taking Stephanie's order for a bottle of champagne, I tugged at his sleeve.



“Hey, would you mind taking a picture of she and I together?” I asked him.

“A picture? How come?” Stephanie asked.

“All the pictures I have of us, we're always in sweats and t-shirts,” I explained. “But we're both out, all glammed up and looking hot, and I thought it would be nice. Besides, if he gets the nod, I will want to remember this night.”

She threw her arms wide and gathered me into a tight hug, our breasts squashed together, smiling broadly at the lens as the waiter took a few snapshots of the two of us together. For once – again, one of those sudden and unexpected memories – Stephanie fought back her urge to stick out her tongue. At least three out of every four pictures I had of the girl featured her sticking out her tongue. The other twenty-five percent, she made the requisite internet “duck face.” Now I finally had a picture of my best friend with a real, beautiful and genuine smile on her face. A smile that matched my own.

* * *

I sat back, a little breathless, certain now that I knew how the detainees in Guantanamo felt after questioning. Steph milked every conceivable detail about Eric – she even wheedled out things I didn't realize I'd processed – over the next hour as we emptied one bottle of champagne and started into another. True to form, Steph puffed contentedly on yet another of my cigarettes, fishing them from my purse as though they were her own. In my mind, they were. I never felt a moment's offense.

The intervening hours slipped away in blissful speed, spent in the company of the woman closest to me, who knew me as well – or better – than I knew myself. We laughed as I hadn't laughed in ages, shared our hopes and excitement for my new, burgeoning relationship and teased one another about the mad lust that he spawned inside me. Thoughts of years being spent with him, loving him, fucking him, marrying him, bearing children to him – these played like ecstatic movies in my brain now.

I almost missed the text message he sent me, so lost I was in the giddy, tipsy conversation with Stephanie and in the chatter and babble of the crowd which had grown around us as the trendy little *bistro* filled up with its nighttime crowd. **I'm here.**



I stood, taking Steph's hand in mine, and made my way through the tables with their chatting people, a cigarette between long-nailed fingers and a slinky sashay in my step, as Eric entered. He wore a tailored suit with a tie, his divinely muscled form filling the custom fitted suit perfectly and in such a way to start a new wave of wet emptiness in my midsection. My fashion-conscious brain registered that the suit must have cost at least nine hundred dollars. I spent a few happy moments just drinking him in, the rugged good looks and the sense of physical power in his stance and stride, the kind eyes and ready smile, the teasing memory of the long, hard length waiting for my naked body between his strong legs. I walked up to him and kissed him deeply, smearing his lips with my lipstick and then wiping him clean with a thumb as I pressed my own lithe, sexual body against his.

An insistent *ahem* broke the spell and I smiled. "Eric, honey, I want you to meet somebody. This is my best friend, Stephanie. Stephanie, this is Eric."

"Hey," she said, smiling brightly.

I threaded my arm through his and led us to our table. I sat close to him, holding his hand and just staring at him while he charmed Stephanie to her socks, getting me the sly wink which meant *Seal of Approval* after only a few short minutes. I sat there, immersed in attraction and friendship and a thorough sense of *rightness* which beamed from me in the form of toothy smiles, genuine laughter and total comfort. A desire to have more night like this – a lifetime of nights like this – suffused me and brought me closer to Eric, resting my breasts against his strong arm and pillowing my head on his wide shoulder, my fingers threaded through his and my heart glowing with warmth.

Jessica Cornwell finally possessed everything she needed. Jessica Cornwell was home at last.

The End.