

# T.G. COOPER



## THE MAN WITH THE PRETTY FACE

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By  
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## INTRODUCTION

I have toyed with the idea for this story for many years. What would it be like for a man to find himself with a gorgeous woman's face? How would the world react? How would it change him?

Legal Notes

Fiction, people. Fiction.

## Chapter One

I couldn't see. I couldn't move. I couldn't speak.

I could hear: the rhythmic sucking sound of a respirator, the steady bleep of a heart monitor. I was in a hospital. Had I been injured? What was the last thing I remembered? Sitting at home drinking Jack Daniels. I had been watching *Goodfellas*, the scene where Robert Deniro kicks a man to death for insulting his friend. Yeah. Great scene. Back when men were men and didn't take any shit from anyone.

I'd been watching the film, and then, what had happened next? My memory came back blank. Blackness. I must have gotten really drunk, I decided. Passed out. But— how did I end up in the hospital?

I faded in and out of consciousness. Sometimes when I woke, I felt different. More precisely, I felt pain. Sometimes in my throat. Sometimes my face. My belly. But it was all muted by drugs, I thought, given how hard I found it to focus.

When you can't move or see, all you can do is THINK, and I was not in much condition to think healthy thoughts, fixating on what had happened, how I had ended up here, the mysterious pains that came and went. I had no answers no even much to go on to find the answers, and my mind raced with paranoid fantasies, many of which ended with me dying. If there were nurses and doctors in this hospital, they never entered my space when I was awake. I started to ache for human contact. I struggled against my restraints, felt some satisfaction when I heard myself making grunting noises, but any attempts to form words failed me. I could only seem to make these high-pitched chirping noises, like a cuckoo bird.

Finally, I woke to the feeling of someone touching my hand. "Unnnhh?" I said, trying to sit up, excited, thrilled, really, just to feel that human touch, to connect with someone outside myself. I wanted to hear a voice, any voice, I thought, but the voice that spoke to me made me feel instantly sick with anger.

"Jackie," my soon to be ex-wife, Leigh said, tracing her fingers around the top of my hand. My middle name is Jack, and she knew I hated it when she called me Jackie. I go by my first name, Cade.

"Unnnhhh!" I said, wanting to pull my hand away, to tell her to go to hell. But I couldn't move, and she just kept tracing that pattern on my hand.

"You sound like a pixie," she said, and I felt her hand go to my throat. "Good."

At her snark-laced comment, I stopped making the little noises. What the hell was she doing here? Why had hospital let her in? Where was my girlfriend, Angel Milan?

Leigh was a total bitch, and she had made my life a living hell with all her nagging, complaining, mind games. Had I cheated on her? Yes, but only after being denied sex for three months while she cheated on me. The feeling of her hand on mine revolted me, and I strained against the bindings on my wrists, wanting to get the hell away from her.

“You might be wondering why I am here. Well, since our divorce hasn’t gone through yet, I am still your next of kin. Poor Angel was quite beside herself. She can’t even visit since you aren’t related. But, then, she’s just your latest slut on the side, right?”

I clenched my mouth shut, refusing to make a sound. In fact, I truly loved Angel and meant to marry her once I was free.

“You’re also probably wondering what *you* are doing here,” Leigh said, her voice dripping with false compassion. “Well, darling, it seems you were in a terrible car accident. You were terribly disfigured. Your face looked like chopped liver.”

My face? No. No. She had to be lying, the nasty as bitch. She was just trying to freak me out—

“But. never to worry. While your body recovers, you’ve been undergoing facial reconstruction surgery under the best in the business, Dr. Indira Patel. You remember her? My friend from yoga class?”

There was something in that way she said it, some snide note of amusement, that gave me chills. What the fuck had she done? Made me into a freak, like in that movie? But, then, that would destroy Patel’s reputation, and I would sue the hell out of her. She wouldn’t do something like that. Would she?

“And your throat and mid-section were injured as well, but Dr. Patel brought in specialists for both of those areas and— good news!- you are going to have a full recovery! You’ll be good as new! In fact, better than new! I brought in a picture for Dr. Patel to use as a guide for your face, sweetie. I believe you will be in *love* with what you see when the bandages come off.”

That didn’t sound bad. It gave me some sense of hope— maybe Leigh had done right by me after all. Maybe I would be fine. I felt myself drifting back toward sleep, my wife still tracing that pattern on the back of my hand. ‘I’m going to sign off on your little fuck-buddy visiting you,’ Leigh said as drifted off to sleep. “The day the bandages come off.”

I drifted in and out of sleep. During one of my lucid moments, Dr. Patel came around and assured me the surgery had been a huge success. “You’re going to look gorgeous,” she said.

I had been a handsome man, and more than a few women had called me gorgeous over the years. It didn’t alarm me, though it should have.

Soon, I found myself sitting up in my bed, nervously waiting as the bandages were removed, Dr. Patel unwinding them carefully, slowly, reaching around as she unwrapped my face like a mummy.

Angel, off to the side so she wouldn't get in the way, held my hand. My bitch of a soon to be ex had finally relented and given her permission to me with me. I couldn't look at Angel as I had to keep my head straight and the eye holes in my bandages were too small for me to see, but as the doctor unwound them from the top of my head down, that would change. I felt cool air against the top of my head, first, then felt it against my forehead as my skin was exposed inch by inch. It felt so good to feel the air against my skin after so long buried under bandages!

"I brought your favorite suit," Angel said, squeezing my hand. The Navy suit. There are photographers outside." Angel couldn't help but sound pleased at that last part. She was a famous model, and like most of them she loved having her picture taken.

The doctor wound down, revealing the area just above my eyes, then two more turns, and my eyes and nose were free. I heard Angel gasp.

"Unnnnn?" I made that squeaky noise, concerned, and she squeezed me hand.

"Nothing," she said. It's fine." But I could see in her eyes it was not fine. A feeling of dread started to grow in me. Once more, I imagined my wife had made me hideous, and yet, would a doctor agree to such a thing, especially a plastic surgeon? It would ruin her reputation, so what had she done?

My eyes freed, I looked over at Angel now to see a face scrunched up with concern. She was shaking her head side to side. I reached toward my face, but the doctor, who looked thrilled with what she saw, blocked my arms. "Not yet."

The doctor removed the breathing tube from my throat. I swallowed and said, "What's wrong?" I asked in that small voice I couldn't seem to deepen.

"Doctor, what's wrong with his voice?" Angel asked, but Patel hushed her.

"Let me finish," she said in a clipped, British accent.

The bandages unwound and unwound, revealing my face, and the consternation on Angel's face only grew greater. 'Omigod,' she whispered as my mouth and then chin were revealed, and then the rest of me. "Omigod."

"What is it?" I said, putting my hands to my newly exposed skin. "What's wrong? Get me a mirror!"

"Cade," Angel said. "Maybe you shouldn't. Babe, there's been some kind of mistake— Oh, God. I am so sorry."

"I don't understand," Patel said, seeming genuinely confused by Angel's reaction. You look marvelous. Just like the picture your wife gave me."

The nurse brought me a mirror and held it towards me. I blinked. Shook my head. I did not see my face. Instead, Angel looked back at me.





I thought it must be some kind of trick mirror. “Is this some kind of joke?” I asked. Her mouth moved, made the words. I looked from the image of Angel in the mirror over to the real Angel. She looked horrified, her eyes filling with tears. I looked back at the mirror, at the other Angel. She looked embarrassed and confused. She looked exactly how I felt. My heart sank my brain finally accepted what it was seeing. “The picture my wife gave you?” I asked, the voice I spoke with now clearly a female’s voice.

“You could be twins!” Patel said. ‘Just like you wanted.’

“Twins?” I reached down and cupped my junk. Thank god. It was all still there. I was still a man, even if I did look like— Angel.

I stared at myself in the mirror. Plump lips. A tiny, upturned nose. A small chin. Now I did put my hands to my soft, smooth cheeks, to that little chin. Angel did make-up ads. She had a perfect face that embodied femininity, and now so did I. “God damnit!”

“What’s wrong?” Patel asked, confused.

I remembered my wife’s cryptic taunt. “You’re going to be in love with what you see.” I now looked exactly like the woman I loved, from the delicately arched eyebrows to the legendary cheekbones. “What’s wrong?” I said. “I didn’t want this. I didn’t want any of it. I don’t want to look like a woman.”

## Chapter Two

The doctor freaked. She was terrified I would sue her, but I eventually convinced her I wouldn't, just to get them to clear the room. In fact, I would sue the hell out of her.

Angel was stunned, and I noticed she wouldn't look at me. She had stopped crying, at least, and was fixing her make-up. Still in my hospital gown, I stared in the mirror, my brain in a panic. I couldn't let anyone see me with this face. Not just the paparazzi outside the hospital. What would be partners think at Garrison and Haverty? My clients?

What would my parents say when I showed up looking like a super model? My kids?

"I am going to kill Leigh," I said, but the words, spoken in my new voice, sounded absurd to me. My voice was high-pitched, and it had a buzzy sound to it. More like a teen girl's voice than even a woman's. I something inside me clench with shame at the sound of it. Looking at my face, finally seeing beyond the physical changes, I noticed my lips looked glossy, pink.. There was a silvery, pink shading above my eyes. My cheeks seemed slightly rosy. Was that blush or was I blushing? "Am I wearing make-up?" I said, mostly to myself. I rubbed my cheeks, my lips. Looked at my fingers. Nothing. The make-up wouldn't come off.

"That bitch," Angel said, and I realized her voice was actually deeper than mine now.

"I have to get out of here without being seen," I said. I saw my suit hanging on the door in a garment bag. Went over and unzipped the bag. "I can't... no one can see me like this."

Angel rallied. She stood. "Okay. I'll go out the front door. That's where all the pic boys are. You go out some other entrance. Take an Uber home."

"Babe," I said, stepping into my trousers. "Great plan."

"I have a lot of experience dodging the media," she said, pleased, though still refusing to look at me.

I zipped up my slacks, buttoned the top button— and grabbed them as they threatened to slip right off me. "What the?"

Angel glanced at me. "You've lost a lot of weight."

I ran my fingers along my ribs, returned to the mirror. I'd been so distracted by what had been done to my face I hadn't even noticed. The liquid diet I'd been on during my hospital time had left me all skin and bones. I looked a starvation victim. I'd always been an entomorph, but through years of hard work at the gym I'd earned a solid sheath of lean muscle. That was all gone. I looked at my skinny arms, the way my collar bone stuck out. I now had a body like a pre-teen boy. Or, with this face, was it more like...? Once more, I felt my stomach turn. I had been... reduced. I felt a terrible feeling of alienation, wrongness. This was not my body, my face. I felt dizzy, stumbled and put my hand against the mirror, bracing myself.

"I can't even fit in my own clothes anymore," I mumbled. "This is so fucked."

"I have an idea," Angel said, undoing the belt on her dress and slipping it off.

"I am not wearing your clothes," I said, terrified at even the suggestion.

"For your trousers," Angel said.

"It's too small," I said, glancing at her tiny little waist. "There's no way."

"Try it," she said. "We can punch a new hole in it."

With my new face, voice, the thought of wearing even a woman's belt scared me. I was feeling emasculated enough.

"It's just for now," Angel said. "I'm not going to think any less—"

"No," I said, but, with my baggy pants threatening to drop to my ankles unless I held them up, I just shook my head and said, "Whatever." I grabbed the belt, slipping it through the first loop. There was no way this tiny little scrap of leather would fit around my waist. I looped it through, slipped the head through the buckle and— it fit. It was the last loop, but it fit. I couldn't even look at Angel as I pulled on the white shirt she'd brought me— it hung loosely over my slender frame like a blouse. I ignored it, leaving it untucked, pulling on my now over-sized blazer.

I didn't bother with the tie, but once more in my suit, in a man's clothes, and I felt a surge of confidence, a swell of masculinity.

One glance in the mirror, though, and I saw I looked like a woman in fashionable cross-dress. The over-sized men's clothes did nothing to make me look more masculine, but only seemed to affirm how slender I'd gotten. "Fuck."

Angel saw the same thing. I glanced at her and saw— pity. It made me sick. "Don't look at me like that!" I said.

"Don't lash out at me!" Angel shouted back. "This isn't my fault."

We'd had some epic arguments. Angel's spunk was one of the things that had attracted me to her. She didn't take any shit. I felt my blood rise and took a deep breath, meaning to bellow back at her. "You don't have to make it worse." But my attempted bellow only came out like a shrieking tea kettle. My hand went to my throat, and I cringed, turned away.

There was a knock on the door, and it pushed open. A bald security guard stepped halfway into the room. "Girls," he said. "This is a hospital."

"G— girls?" I choked.

"Thank you, sir," Angel said, sweetly. "We'll keep it down."

"Thank you, ladies," the guard said, closing the door.

*Girls. Ladies.* Was this what I was going to have to deal with now?

"We need to go," Angel said, taking command. My shrinking violet routine had opened the door for her to take charge. I was so stunned and embarrassed I just deferred to her.

"I'll go first," she said. "Wait a couple minutes. Then, find a way out. Okay? I called an Uber. It is waiting outside the Emergency room entrance."

"Yeah," I said, nodding, my eyes still on the floor.

"One more thing," Angel said, digging in her purse, pulling out a pair of sunglasses. They were the big, 50s movie star-style glasses celebrities had been wearing. Female celebrities.

"Come on," I said.

“You don’t want to be recognized,” Angel said, pushing the glasses into my hand.

“Recognized? Really?” I gestured toward my face.

“As me?”

“Oh. Right.”

She gave me a kiss on the cheek. I still couldn’t look at her. “See you at home. You’ll— you’ll be okay.” She left.

I put the glasses on the bed. There was no way I was wearing those ridiculous things. I waited. Counted. I looked in the mirror. I had short hair, at least, but it only seemed to enhance the feminine structure of my face. If anyone saw me, they would think I was Angel. She had millions of followers on social media. Billboards all over LA.

I thought about some creepy dude seeing me, thinking I was the girl he whacked off to every night, and it made my skin crawl, both because it was disgusting and also because it was such a strange, foreign thought for me.

I picked up the glasses and slipped them on, ignoring the revulsion I felt at wearing another item of women’s clothing. I would overcome all this. I would. I just needed to get home, and then I would put my life back together and make sure Leigh paid.

## Chapter Three

Angel walked brusquely out of the main entrance to the hospital. Cameras flashed. People shouted questions. “Where’s your husband? Is he okay?” She ignored them. Waving. Smiling. Climbing into her limo. As soon as the driver closed the door she sighed, the professional smile dropping from her face. “Fuck,” she sighed, crossing her legs. “What the hell am I going to do now?” She thought about Cade, remembering his square jaw, always bristling with fashionable stubble. He’d been a stud, a man all the girls wanted, all the men wanted to be. As a boyfriend, he’d been a perfect accessory.

Then she thought about how he looked now— like a... like... literally, like a super model. Gorgeous. And that voice? What would the media say about her dating a man who looked like her sister? Who sounded like a teen-age bimbo?

Thinking about kissing him now, with his big, plump lips, making love, him making little, feminine noises, it made her cringe. How would it look if they went to an opening together? That slender little thing on her arm. It was too humiliating to even think about, and she had a strong desire to break it off with him now before the world found out what he’d become.

But if she left him now, how would that look? What would people say about her abandoning her man in his time of need? *Fuck!*

Shivering, she reached for a bottle of vodka and splashed it into a rocks glass. “Siri,” she said, “call my agent.”

## Chapter Four

Kimmy Lee crouched behind a hedge outside the Emergency Room exit. Only 21 and fresh out of journalism school at NYU, she'd had this gut feeling that Angel and her boyfriend would try and sneak out of the hospital, avoiding all the media goons and fans at the front door. Angel's people had sent out a bulletin announcing the big event, location and time. But, well, Kim just had a feeling, and she was determined to make a name for herself. Short and petite, she wore a green, over-sized Army surplus coat covered in patches— Iron Man, Captain America— all the Avengers. And Wonder Woman.

So far, though, nothing, and all the unshakable faith she had in her intuition was shaken. She thought about running around to the front, trying to catch a pic yet. Glancing at her Pixel, she saw the time. Damn, it was probably too late. Kimmy cursed. Stomped her Army boots. She'd been counting on the freelance sales to help cover the rent and now she would get nothing, and that was—

What's this? Her heart leapt. She saw a woman stepping tentatively out the door, glancing around. She wore a man's suit— well— and was wearing movie queen glasses, but there was no mistaking those cheek bones. It was Angel! Kimmy lifted her camera, trained it on the model and started snapping away, thrilled. Not only was she getting exclusive pics, but Angel had a total new look— the short hair, the suit. It was androgynous glory, something she'd never done. Kimmy felt a thrill of excitement. She'd be the first to show this edgy new look to the world! She snapped away as Angel stood on the curb, cowering next to a pillar, looking side to side, offering gorgeous shots of her face in profile, straight on.

Kimmy took close-ups, zoomed back for half body shots— that belt was so cute — full body, more close-ups. A black Buick SUV pulled up, and Angel scurried over, practically dove into the car. Kimmy snapped a last few pics of the car pulling away, then pumped her fist triumphantly. "Yes!"

She started to cycle through the pics on her Digital camera. So many good shots! I am going to be famous, she thought. Hello, world! Here comes Kimmy!

## Chapter Five

I dove into the SUV, yanked the door closed. The car moved forward, and I sank back into the bench seat with a sigh. The driver kept glancing back to look at me, a weird smile on her face, like she was crazy happy. It was the kind of lunatic smile you see on the faces of women when they are about to eat a salad in a commercial. She looked like she was 20 years old. Probably a college student driving Uber to help pay the tuition.

I started to snap at her, ask her what the hell was wrong with her, but then I remembered my voice, so I threw her a “what the hell?” Shrug.

“Omigod... omigod...” she said, glancing at the road, back at me. “I know you probably get sick of this and everything, but you are SO PRETTY!”

Ugh. Pretty? I realized now why she seemed so flustered. Angel had ordered the car using her Uber account, and looking like her twin now... well, it only made sense. The girl thought I was Angel. I nodded. Waved. Tried to give off a— I’d just like to relax vibe.

Her glances back were getting more frequent. We started to drift across the center line, and she looked back, yanked the wheel, tossing me against the side of the car. I felt the anger build, waving to her, trying to gesture— watch the road! Watch the road!

“Yeah. Okay,” she said, turning fully around, putting both hands on the wheel. “I’m just so freaked out, though. I mean, Angel Milan, in my car?” She looked at me in the rearview mirror. The driver was cute, not gorgeous. A clean scrubbed co-ed. I’d probably do her, I decided, fiddling with my sunglasses. But then I wondered—would any woman want to do me now? Looking like this?

We drove on toward the house. I settled back, trying to ignore the way she kept looking at me in the rearview mirror. Almost ogling me. I shifted my position in the seat, but she adjusted the mirror. “I mostly pick up drunks heading home from bars. Make pretty good money on weekends,” my driver said. “I’ve been lucky so far. No puking! Some of the other drivers warned me it happens.”

I stared out the window now, ignoring her, hoping she would get the hint. But no. Of course not. And, once more, the subject changed to me. “Your eyebrows are so on point,” she said. “Where do you get them done?”

I almost choked, looking at her, catching a glimpse of myself in the rearview mirror, my delicate eyebrows arched above those Betty Davis sunglasses. I shook my head, still disgusted at the thought of speaking to her in my teeny bopper voice.

She looked hurt, for the first time seeming to pick up on the fact I didn’t want to talk to her. “Oh,” she said. “That’s cool or whatever.”

We drove the rest of the way in blissful silence. I huddled in a corner of the seat, staring out the window, trying not to obsess about what to do now— and failing. I would have to get surgery, I decided. As soon as possible. I would work from home in the meantime. Contact clients through email. No one would look at

me again until I once more looked like a man. The important thing was, I would get through this, and I would sue the hell out of Leigh and everyone else.

The driver pulled up the long driveway to our house, high on a hill that looked down over Los Angeles. As I got out, I distinctly heard her whisper “bitch.”

I turned and stared after her as she drove away. No one had ever called me a bitch, and it really pissed me off.



## Chapter Six

As I walked in the door to the house, our dog, Gruffles, came running into the hall.

"Gruffles!" I called, squatting down, forgetting about my voice for a moment.

Gruffles stopped. Sniffed, turned her head sideways suspiciously.

"Gruff? It's me?" I said, feeling a stabbing in my heart as even my dog didn't recognize me.

Gruff backed away, making a whining noise.

"Honey?" Angel called, and Gruff turned and ran off toward her.. It sounded like she was in the living room. "That you?"

I didn't answer, but made my way back, tension building as I prepared to face — I didn't even know what. How did she feel about this face? What did it mean for our relationship? I thought back to how I'd behaved at the hospital, and I did not feel good about it. I was the man. I was supposed to be strong. I resolved to do better now. I would face this all head on, show Angel that nothing inside me had changed.

An enormous window dominated the living room, providing us with a sweeping view of Los Angeles stretched out below us, the sun just starting to set, an orange ball blazing against purple clouds. The window had automatically tinted to make the sun bearable on the eyes. Angel sat on a couch facing away from the window, a rocks glass in her hand. I walked halfway across the room and stood there, regarding her. She was studying my face, looking over my new features. I could imagine what it was like for her to look at me and see herself. I couldn't read her eyes, wasn't sure what she was thinking. She just seemed— blank.

Neither one of us knew what to say, who should start. Remembering my resolve as I entered the room, I finally spoke, bracing myself against what I knew would be discomfort as I tried to express myself with my new voice. "I am going to fix all this," I said, gesturing at my face. I started across the room toward her. "I'll hire the best surgeons, have them restore everything. In the meantime, I can work from home. Keep this away from my clients. This is all just a speed bump."

Angel smiled. It was the first time I'd seen her smile since the — revelation. "Good," she said. "I like where your head is."

Everything was going to be fine. I felt stronger. More confident. I leaned down to kiss Angel on the lips. She turned her head, so my lips landed on her cheek instead.

"I'm sorry," she said, looking away. "It's just.. you look like me now. It just seems... wrong? To kiss myself?"

I backed away. That feeling hit me again— a punch in the gut. "So, what, we're not going to kiss or make love?"

"Do we have to talk about this right now?" Angel said, getting up, going to the bar, freshening her drink.

"Yes," I said. "We do."

"Well, then, no. No is my answer. I can't... I'm sorry.. but I can't even think about making love to you right now, the way you look, the way you sound."

"But this isn't my fault!" I yelled, regretting it immediately as it came out filled with girlish drama.

"It's not mine, either," Angel said. "And I'm sorry, but I don't find you attractive right now." With that she turned and walked out of the room, leaving me there, bathed in the ruby rays of the dying sun.

I went and poured myself a drink. Slammed it down. Poured another. Walking to my office, drink in hand, I found myself wobbling, stumbling. I felt like I'd drank half a bottle of booze, not just one drink. Shit. I was so skinny now. I'd lost my capacity for liquor.

Hell.

I made my way into my home office, sat down at the desk. I had a secure line here, set up to detect recording devices of any kind, etc.... I called my lawyer, Kip Bergman.

"Cade, my man," he said as he picked up, having seen my name on his caller ID. "I heard you were getting out of the hospital today. How's it hanging?"

"Kip," I said. "There were some issues with my surgery."

"What? Who is this?"

"I know I don't sound like me. The surgeon made a mistake, it messed up my voice. This is Cade."

"Is this for real?" He asked.

"Yes. It is. I need you to nail Leigh to the wall, the doctor. Patel. They did this to me as some kind of—sick joke."

"I'm not comfortable discussing this over the phone. Listen, and if this is Cade, I am sorry, but I would be remiss in my duty as an attorney to discuss any legal matters unless I am sure I am speaking to my client."

"Kip. I swear to god, it's me."

"Well, why not come on into the office. Or, let's play some golf, or let me come there so I can verify. You understand?"

"Fuck!" I said. I did understand, but I didn't care. "I can't... you don't want to see me right now. The surgery? That's what I want to talk to you about."

"I've got a call on another line," Kip said. "Get back to me when you want to meet, okay, honey?"

The line went dead. Had he just called me honey? I slammed the phone down. Shit. No one would recognize this voice over the phone. But what if I did go in person? Kip wouldn't recognize me then, either. He would think I was Angel fucking around. How could I convince him I was me? Show him my dick? In any case, I didn't want him to even see me with this face. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck

The destruction of Leigh would have to wait, as much as I wanted to crush her for what she'd done to me. I needed to get my face back, my voice. That had to be my priority.

I called my assistant, Janice. She worked out of my office at the firm. "You have reached the office of Cade Morehouse."

I considered explaining my predicament, but in a moment of inspiration I just took the easier path. "Hey, Jan, this is Angel," I said. "Cade needs you to identify

the top three plastic surgeons in LA and send us their contact information.”

“Of course, Miss Milan. Is there anything else?”

It jarred me to hear someone refer to me as *miss*. “No. Just be thorough and discreet.”

“Of course.”

The call ended. I appreciated Janice’ professionalism more than ever. Her voice and demeanor had not changed at all during the call. She’d shown no surprise or even interest in why I had made the request. I could have asked her to get me a bottle of water, and she would have responded the same way.

Meanwhile, I had a revelation: It would be easier to get things done on the phone if I just pretended to be Angel. I wasn’t sure how I felt about it, but it seemed for now I had very little choice.

I thought about the flip side of my problem: Not only would Kip not recognize me, but *no one* would recognize me as long as I looked like this, sounded like this. There was no way I was getting any kind of new ID looking like this, though. That was for sure. Besides, I would be getting it fixed. And soon. Taking another sip of my drink, feeling it surge through my skinny little body, making me woozy. I didn’t care. I was determined not to let myself be made— less. I was the same whiskey drinking, cigar smoking, get things done man I’d always been. This face wasn’t going to change that. Leigh was not going to win.

I took another drink and drifted into unconsciousness.

## Chapter Seven

"It's not her," Megs McGhan said looking at the pictures Kimmy had shown her. Kimmy's mouth dropped open. "Of course it's her. What are you talking about?"

They were in Megs' office at the LA News. The office had a glass window that looked out over the newsroom, a gloomy hell of fluorescent lighting and shabby, metal desks. The staff, well aware of the impending death of the print media, had a doomed, hopeless look, and the grooming skills of a pack of rabid wombats. They all looked like they were a month past due for a hair cut.

"I admit it does look a lot like her, but, see?" She pulled up pics of Angel walking out the front entrance.

"What the hell?" Kimmy said, staring. "But, then, who is this?"

"Just some random civilian, I guess."

"Who just happened to be at the hospital at the very same time?" Kimmy felt her heart sinking. The pic of Angel looked totally legit. She kept arguing only because she really needed some cash.

"Sorry, kid. It happens. Better luck next time."

"But, maybe—"

"Bye!" Megs said. "I got a paper to put out."

"Damn damn damn!" Kimmy shouted once she got outside the building.

"Hell yeah!" A homeless man shouted back as he pushed a shopping cart full of junk along the sidewalk. "Damn it all!"

"Thank you for your support!" Kimmy said, making a fist.

"Want my picture?" The man said, smiling to reveal a mouth full of black and yellow teeth.

"Um, sure," Kimmy said, snapping a picture.

The man shambled off. Kimmy walked the opposite direction, trying to figure out how she could make some quick money to pay her rent. She figured she would dodge the landlord for a few days, beg the manager down at IHOP for some extra waitressing shifts. She got on her moped, fired up the sputtering engine and pattered her way home. She lived at The Grand, an ironically named former hotel that had been converted into apartments in the edge of a shabby neighborhood that looked like it should have been condemned 40 years ago. Rumor had it Seth Rogan had lived here when he first came to California looking to make it big.

As she pulled into the courtyard, the GR had burned out, so the 1950s sign at the entrance now read "The And." She saw her landlord standing right at the door to her apartment. She skidded to a halt and started to turn around. The landlord heard her moped, the tires, turned and shouted. "Kimmy! Due is the rent!"

"I'm someone else!" Kimmy shouted, speeding away. As she merged into the traffic creeping down the cracked, potholed street, she felt her heart racing. Mr. Borscht scared her. He had a giant beard, spoke in some sort of Eastern

European accent, and she was pretty sure he was probably a giant serial killer when he wasn't sitting in his room watching old wrestling movies.

She needed money, and it meant she was going to have to resort to something she swore she'd never do. The very thought made her feel dirty, disgusting, like a fallen woman. *Desperate times call for desperate measures*, she thought, steeling her nerve for the degradation she was about to suffer.

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"Oh, yes," the man said, licking his lips. "I like what I see."

"I thought you would," Kimmy said, hiding her revulsion behind what she hoped was a seductive smile.

"How about 200 dollars?"

"Five hundred," Kimmy said, feeling insulted.

"Three."

"Done. Let's just get this over with."

The man fished a contract from a desk drawer. "Sign it. Standard freelance agreement."

Kimmy looked at the man, the framed covers of his publication, *Scandal*, lined the wall behind his desk. It was the worst gossip rag in the city. But rent was rent. She signed. The man pulled out an envelope stuffed with cash and slid it across the desk.

Kimmy opened the envelope, started counting the cash.

"You don't trust me?"

"Nope. Should I?"

"Nope."

The both chuckled. As Kimmy started out the door, she paused and looked back. "What story are you going to run? With the pics?"

"Hell if I know. I just hand 'em to one of the writers, and they come up with the bullshit."

## Chapter Eight

"I'm really pretty," Angel said, staring at her husband, asleep in his office chair. She admired his cheek bones, his radiant skin, kissable lips. It was hard to even think of him as Cade anymore, or even a man. He looked so sweet and peaceful, sleeping there in his big leather chair, his manly office all dark woods, paintings of Medieval hunting scenes, great battles. She hated to wake him, but the sun had set, the servants had laid out the table, and diner was ready.

She nudged him. He made a soft sound. She nudged him again. "Cade?" She said. The name seemed wrong. "Diner."

Cade's long, curly lashes fluttered; his big eyes opened. "Wha? What time is it?" He said, wincing, Angel thought, at the sound of that voice.

"Just after seven. Dinner is ready."

"I must have fallen asleep," he said, rubbing his face. He got to his feet, wobbling, braced himself against the desk. "I guess I had a few too many."

Angel glanced at the crystal decanter— still nearly full. *Not much*, she thought. *For a man.*

They made their way to the veranda— china, silver, candles, a white tablecloth. "What's all this?" Cade said, sitting.

"Welcome home!" Angel said. "I wanted your first night back to be special." It was not the way she'd imagined it. She'd thought it would be joyful, fun, celebratory and probably ending with some really hot sex. But, no. Leigh had ruined everything. God, what a bitch.

Their food had already been placed. "I sent the servants away. I didn't think you would want them to see you."

Cade nodded, lifting the silver cover from his plate to reveal a steaming slab of prime rib. His mouth watered. He gave his girlfriend a smile. She knew it was his favorite.

Angel saw the pretty smile spread across the pretty face of her pretty boyfriend. It unnerved her. Confused her. But she smiled back, the exact same smile on the exact same face. They started eating, silver clacking against china. Cade dug in, but managed to eat only a third of what was on his plate before he felt stuffed, bloated. He sat back, took a sip of water.

Angel, who'd been nibbling at her salad, thought it might be a good time to talk about their situation. But first, she decided to make sure Cade knew she was on his side— completely and totally. "I am so fucking pissed at Leigh for this," Angel said. "We need to destroy her."

"We will," Cade said, still struggling to deal with the fact that his voice was higher, softer than Angel's. "We will."

"I'm going to get my face back," he said. "I am going to get this fixed. And then I am going to make Leigh suffer."

"Good," Angel said. Inside, she felt like wincing at every fluted word from her boyfriend's plump lips, but she hid it. "That's what I expect from you. That's what I expect from the— man— I love." Shit. She'd hesitated on the word man, and

she could see the concern flash in Cade's eyes. He'd caught it. "I talked to Isabella this afternoon."

"Isabella? Your agent? Why?"

"I wanted to sound her out. Get her thoughts on how to handle this."

"You told her about me?"

"Don't worry. She isn't going to..."

"I don't want anyone to know. Isabella or anyone else!"

"We need to be proactive. Get in front of this."

"There is nothing to get in front of," Cade shrieked. "God damnit! I'm going to get surgery. Undo this! No one had to ever know!"

"No one will know," Angel said, but a thought rose unbidden in her mind: He's sexy when he's angry. It was true, and terrible, and she felt laughter building up within her to see him there looking so sexy and hot, shrieking in that teen-age bimbo voice.

"Isabella knows now! She'll tell everyone in her office!"

"I didn't tell her all the details," Angel lied, adopting a smug, condescending tone, like a teacher talking to a child. "I just told her there had been some... unexpected complications. I just wanted to sound her out, honey."

"You shouldn't have said anything," Cade said, still shrieking. "You should have talked to me first! I can't believe you went to her behind my back!"

"Your being hysterical," Angel said, the urge to laugh building and building.

"Hysterical?" Cade wailed, his voice impossibly rising to an even higher pitch. "Hysterical?"

Angel couldn't help herself. It was all too absurd. The laughter burst through like an explosion. She covered her mouth, fighting to stop.

Cade's mouth dropped open in shock and embarrassment. He sat there stunned, unable to even process what was happening. He'd never been subjected to such— such— dismissive arrogance. Part of him wanted to get up, walk away, but it struck him as just the kind of thing a woman would do in this situation.

"I'm sorry," Angel said, getting herself under control. "I don't mean— really."

"I do sound ridiculous," Cade admitted, deciding to own it. "Good God."

"No," Angel said. "That's not— It's just..."

Cade, just wanting to distract himself, sliced another sliver of beef and stabbed it with his fork, reaching it toward his mouth, but no. He really was full. "I sound like Mini Mouse on helium."

Angel chuckled, once more covering her mouth. "You really do," she said, realizing that Cade had given her an out. "Or, maybe Mini Mouse's little sister."

"Now that's just cruel," Cade said.

## Chapter Nine

I cracked open the door to Dr. Abelard's office and peaked inside. Comfy chairs. Potted ferns. A waterfall. A receptionist sitting behind a sleek, glass desk. No one waiting. I had envisioned a crowded waiting room full of people who would all be staring at me, and I felt slightly relieved. I had a hoodie pulled up over my head and Angel's over-sized sunglasses on— they covered more of this face than any of my own. My driver had dropped me off right outside the door, so I'd managed to avoid being seen. He'd called me Miss Milan when I'd gotten into the car. I didn't correct him.

"Good morning," the receptionist said, offering me a welcoming smile. She was a looker. A nine even here in LA, and I gave her the once over as I approached her desk. Full breasted, and gorgeous legs. I would have flirted with her before, but I found myself feeling a new sense of insecurity, knowing that I looked prettier than her. It annoyed me that I felt like this, and it made me feel that I'd lost not just some of my confidence, but my power.

"I have an appointment," I said, speaking in as low and husky a voice as I could manage.

"Of course," the receptionist said, glancing at her computer. "Let me show you to your private waiting room, Mr. White." I'd made the appointment under a false name. Common practice at these high-end chop shops, Janice had told me. Everyone in LA got work done, and they all wanted to keep it a secret, as if no one would notice their miraculously younger faces, or buy their bullshit about a new facial cream.

I had watched her intently to see if the receptionist glitched on the *Mr.* but if anything about me struck her as odd she hid it well. I guess a big part of her job was making people feel at ease, un-scrutinized. She led me to a private room, asked if I wanted something to drink, gave me some forms to fill out.

The doctor kept me waiting just long enough to remind me how important he thought he was. As soon as he walked in his eyes went right to my face, and he did not hide his surprise as they settled on my little chin, then to my cheeks.

"Remarkable," he said.

"That's one word for it," I said, still speaking in my low, gruff voice. I didn't sound like a man, but it was better than sounding like a teen-age girl.

"Please remove the sunglasses, the hood," he said.

I took a deep breath and did as he'd asked.

The breath caught in his throat. "Incredible," he gasped, staring at me. "You're perfect."

I dropped my eyes. There was more than just professional respect for the work that had been done on me in his reaction. There was also— desire. I had given that look to a lot of women, and I recognized it now as his gaze fell on my features. It unnerved me to have another man look at me like that, and I should have told him off, but instead I just sat there, speechless.



He had a file in his hands. Once he finally pulled his eyes from my face, he glanced at it, shaking his head. Then back at me. "Mr. Morehouse," he said. Of course, he knew my real name. "I don't know if I can help you."

## Chapter Ten

“What?” The words shocked me so much I spoke in what was now my true voice.

“The change is too radical,” he said.

“No!” I said, at least keeping myself from letting my voice rise to that feminine shriek. “You need to fix this. What was done can be undone.”

“It’s not that simple. Let me explain. Please.”

“I don’t want an explanation. I just want you to fix this.”

He pulled the picture of me Janice had sent over— my real face— and held it toward me. It already seemed like it belonged to someone else. “Look at the chin. The nose. The eyes. Your jaw has been cut away, your nose diminuated. The skin around your eyes cut back to make them larger.”

“And?”

“Don’t you see? Imagine a sculpture chiseling away at a piece of marble. One he had cut away a section of stone—“

“Fuck.” It hit me what he was saying.

“Yes. What has been cut away is gone.”

“Forever.”

“Yes. I can’t make you look like this again. No one can.”

I punched the armrest. Shook my head. “You must be able to do something.”

“I can make you look less... um....”

“Like a bitch?” I spat.

“More masculine,” he offered. “We can make changes. You just won’t look like you. I’m sorry.”

“Thanks for nothing,” I said, getting up.

His eyes got that look again as he once more stared at me. “You really do look just like her,” he said, almost like he was talking to himself.

I grabbed my sunglasses and put them on, pulled up my hoodie. He held the door for me. I flipped him off and stormed out of the office, my insides tied in knots.

“Where to now, Miss Milan?” The driver asked.

I tensed at that. *Miss Milan*. I wanted to punch him in the head, scream I’m Cade Morehouse, you stupid fuck! But I didn’t because I didn’t want anyone to know who I was, so I just sank back into the seat, crossed my arms and said, “Home.”

I refused to believe what Abelard had told me. Nothing was impossible. I wanted my face back. Mine. I would keep looking until I found a surgeon who could give me what I wanted. I raised the privacy window, my mind whirling. It was only just after 10, and already my day couldn’t get any worse.

My phone buzzed. I glanced at it to see it was Janice calling. I punched accept and said, “Yes?”

“Miss Milan,” Janice said, sounding surprised. “I was hoping to reach Mr. Morehouse?”

*Miss Milan.* Again. It rankled, but I couldn’t explain. “He’s, um, still recovering. Tell me, and I’ll make sure he gets the message.”

“Oh, I call back later, thanks.”

“Just give me the message,” I said, infuriated, not used to people refusing me. Silence. “I’m not sure..”

“Well, I am. I... Mr. Morehouse was very clear that he wanted me to take his messages. Do you want me to tell him you refused to do your job?”

“I’m afraid this is not a matter I can discuss with you, *Miss Milan.*”

“Goddamnit!” I said, my rage boiling over. “It’s me, okay? I am Cade Morehouse! There was a complication with my surgery, and now I sound like this, so just give me the fucking message!”

Silence.

“Janice? Did you hear me? Janice?”

I looked at the phone. She’d hung up on me.

“Fuck!” I threw my phone out the window and watched as it bounced down the street, eventually being crushed under the wheel of a Cooper Mini, glass and components spraying across the asphalt.

I stomped my feet and punched the seat, every muscle in my body tense with rage.

## Chapter Eleven

Angel sat perched on a stool while the team did her hair and make-up. She wore a short, white silk robe over the lingerie she'd be modeling. She glanced at herself in the mirror, saw her boyfriend's pretty face looking back at her and cringed inwardly. She wanted to get out of the relationship. Badly. It wasn't right for a man to look like a gorgeous girl. To look like *her*. She liked to think of herself as an open-minded woman, a progressive, someone who lived above the petty rules that governed the lives of most people. She'd voted for Bernie, hadn't she? She'd slept with other women, for Christ sake.

But, there were limits.

She'd fallen for Cade Morehouse, as straight and rugged a man as you could ever find with the face of a man, a real man's man. And now he was— not himself. He'd been turned into something else, and she was so not into it. That voice! How could she sleep with a man with a voice like that? And, God, what would people say when it finally came out? When people saw him? It would look like she was dating her twin.

Camera ready, she thanked the staff and got up from her chair, making her way to the set where they would be shooting. Lighting wasn't ready, so she took a seat. Checked her phone. There was a text from Isabella— *You need to see this*, with a link. Angel clicked, and an article from *Scandal* popped up. The headline read, "Angel Milan's secret shame?" There was picture of Cade leaving the hospital.

*Hell*, Angel thought, skimming the article, which speculated that Angel had a twin sister she'd been keeping in hiding. The article emphasized it was all conjecture, but in such a way many readers would probably take it as fact. They also made some scalding comments about her "sister's" fashion sense, particularly taking issue with how the belt didn't match the rest of the outfit. *Idiots. That belt is fabulous*, Angel thought, but mostly she was thinking about her reputation. The article, the pack of lies that it was, made her sound bad, and already users had posted scathing comments about what a cold bitch she was to treat her "sister" like that..

She called Isabella. "What are we going to do about this?"

"We're canvassing right now, data mining social media. Give us a few hours. I'll have a strategy by tonight."

## Chapter Twelve

There had been an accident on the freeway, and it took us nearly three hours to get back home. I had calmed down by then. But in that calm had grown an increasing sense that I was trapped behind this face, that my world had grown very small. I didn't like that feeling, but I didn't know how to break out of this trap my ex-wife had sprung on me. The world no longer recognized me. It was like I had ceased to exist as a person, or at least as my own man.

One thing I was sure of: I would not allow myself to become *Miss Milan*.

As soon as I got home, I went right to my office. Sitting down at my computer, I opened up my email, getting ready to send an email to Janice, ripping her a new one. As soon as I opened my account, though, I saw she had sent me an email just before I'd gotten home. The title was *Crisis*.

I opened the email, read it and collapsed back into my chair. What the hell? It seemed someone had filed a complaint against me with the SEC alleging mismanagement of funds. I was being investigated, and word had gotten out. My clients were panicking. They'd been trying to call me for the past two hours, but no one could get ahold of me. I thought about my phone being crushed by that car and cursed myself for throwing it out the window, being so emotional.

Normally, whenever clients panicked—usually when the market fell, or there was some news that rattled them, they called and I calmed them, or we met, and I did it in person. They just need to be assured, and a big part of my job was just managing their emotions.

But now what could I do? I couldn't call them with my little girl voice. Experience had already told me no one would believe it was me. And if I met them face to face? With this face?

I just sat there, staring at the email message flickering on my computer screen. SEC investigation. Clients panicking. I had no idea what to do. My clients needed me. If I didn't reach out, didn't connect, I was sure I would lose most if not all of them.

And that meant I would lose everything. Everything.

I had to figure a way out. I did some of my best thinking when stimulated, so I reached for my decanter of scotch, but stopped. It hit me too hard now. I went to the wine rack in the kitchen, found a nice red I knew paired well with a cigar. I got a Cuban from my humidor, held it under my nose breathing in the sweet smell of earth and cedar, feeling an endorphin rush just from the smell of it. I snipped off the end, slipped it into my mouth, rolling it, licking the tip with my tongue, then flicked my lighter and held the dancing flame to the cigar, drawing in, watching as the end of the cigar flared and a silky cloud of smoke billowed into my office. It felt subtly different to hold the cigar in my mouth now. My lips were much bigger, but it still smoked the same and as the nicotine flowed into my blood stream, I felt my head clear, my thoughts sharpen.

I took a sip of my wine, and the flavors milled perfectly. I put my feet on the desk and toked, smiling, feeling in control, just mulling over my situation, letting inspiration come.

“Yes!” I said when I finally realized how to get all this under control. I emailed Janice. “I will meet clients starting tomorrow morning. Set up appointments. Draft a letter explaining everything is fine, their money is safe, and I just want to meet them to offer my personal assurances and review the performance of their investments.”

My plan was so simple and obvious, I couldn’t believe I hadn’t thought of it sooner. I finished my glass of wine, poured another. Yes. It was much more manageable than the hard whiskey, I thought, puffing on my cigar. I chuckled, pleased with myself. I would face my clients, and not one of them would know I looked like a woman.

## Chapter Thirteen

Kimmy woke to the sound of her phone ringing: To Go! Team's *Do it, alright*. Her head felt like it was stuffed with cotton, as did her mouth. She'd used a little of the money she had left over from rent to get some weed and bake, falling into a sweet, dreamy slumber. She waited for her phone to go to voicemail, cursing whatever idiot had ruined her perfect dream, hugged her pillow to her chest and closed her eyes hoping to find that perfect place again, but as soon as her phone chirped to indicate someone had left a voice mail, it rang again.

Kimmy cursed, threw her pillow across the room and grabbed the phone, looking around the hair that fell into her face to squint blearily at the number. She didn't recognize it. Probably telemarketers, but she accepted anyway. "Kid," the man from Scandal said. "I need more pics! That Angel shit took off."

Why me? Kimmy wondered and even almost asked. It had just been a fluke that she'd gotten the pictures of— whoever that was, but then she remembered there was still next month's rent to worry about, plus cat food and people food and....

"Kid?"

"Yeah," she said. "Okay."

"There's a press conference for tonight regarding the Angels. I'll text you the details. Be there and get me some photos of the coming and going. I got a regular to shoot the presser."

"Right. How much?"

"As many pics as you can get."

"How much money?"

"Ah. Yes. I do like that about you kid. 500 bucks."

"Done." This time Kimmy knew he'd offered her a fair rate right from the top.

## Chapter Fourteen

Angel walked into the living room, heels clicking on the hardwood floors, her purse still dangling from her forearm, and froze as she saw herself sitting on the couch, wearing a hoodie and a pair of jeans, looking back at her.

"Who?" She started, then caught herself, remembering, but still shocked to see him there looking just like her. She didn't know if she would ever get used to it, even as she admired how pretty he looked there, the sunlight from the window pouring over him.

"What?" Cade said, his pretty face scrunching with confusion.

"Oh," Angel said. "Nothing." She put down her purse and took a seat across from Cade. "I guess you heard," Angel said.

"I did," Cade said in that ridiculous voice. "But don't worry. I figured it out." He smiled, and it pained Angel to see how sweet and pretty he looked when he smiled. Once more, she felt a pang of loss for the granite jawed man she'd fallen in love with.

"Figured it out?" Angel braced herself. She and her agent Isabella had met and formulated a strategy. She felt very confident in what they'd discussed, and in his current condition she just didn't think Cade was capable of handling the situation himself. The poor dear. Still. "So, shoot. I'm all ears." She would hear him out and then lead him around to her way of thinking.

The smile of Cade's face grew wider, and his big, doe eyes sparkled. He was obviously very proud of himself. He picked up a strip of cloth that had been sitting on the couch next to him and held it up triumphantly. "We bandage me up. No one sees my face. Problem solved."

"I don't see how that solves the problem."

"I go see my clients, calm them down. Interface with folks at the office, tell them I will be working from home."

"What about your voice?"

Cade found his lowest point and put on his mansetto. "I just hide it."

"Okay. Maybe, but I don't see how this really answers the news story about me and my shame sister."

"Shame sister? What are you even talking about?"

"The pictures in *Scandal*. What were you talking about?"

They filled each other in on the details of their divergent stories. "So, the bandage thing isn't going to make this whole story about my sad twin go away."

"Who cares about that?" Cade snapped. "It's just bullshit in some gossip rag."

"I care!" Angel snapped back. "It's gone viral, and people believe it. They are posting the most hateful things about me! If my reputation is hurt, I could lose my endorsements."

Cade got up, paced, walked to the big glass window, frustrated. He had the perfect plan. It looked like everything was going to work out, and now this. "Okay, so you obviously have some scheme. What do you want to do?"



Angel took a breath. She knew he was not going to like what she was about to say. She joined him at the window, slipped her arm around his waist and put her head on his shoulder. "You've always been so strong," she said. "You've always taken care of me."

The sudden tenderness resonated with Cade. He took her hand, brought it to his lips and kissed it. "I will always protect you."

It sounded absurd in that tea-kettle voice, but Angel made the little soft moan she knew men loved and said, "I know you will."

"So, this plan must be pretty terrible given the way you're working your way into it."

"No. Not terrible. It's the right way to handle it. Isabella had her team canvassing social media, she— we— came up with a very sound strategy— for both of us."

Cade put his nose to her hair, breathing in the sweet smell of honey and vanilla, then kissed her on the head. "Tell me."

"You show your face to the world."

Cade pulled away. "No. That's— no."

Angel went to him, tried to take his hand, but he pulled it away. "I am NOT letting anyone see me like this!" He screamed.

"Why not?" Angela said, deciding she would switch tactics since the sweet and romantic approached had failed.

"Why not? Look at me!"

"Oh, my God!" Angel said, stepping away, shaking her head as if in horror. "You're afraid!"

The word stung. "Like hell."

"You are. You're terrified."

"It isn't that..."

"It isn't just your face that's changed," Angel continued, getting ready to plunge her dagger into his guts. "You're..."

"Don't say it," Cade said, clenching his fists. "Don't..."

"You're a girl. You've become a girl on the inside, in your head. A frightened little girl!"

"Shut up!" Cade screamed. "Shut the hell up!" He clenched his fist and stepped toward Angel. She stepped right back toward him.

"Maybe I should start calling you Katie."

"I am going to tell you one more time. Drop it," Cade said, shaking with fury. "Enough."

Angel glared back, her own fists clenched at her sides, then she seemed to sag, and a sob escaped her lips as tears rolled down her cheeks. "Don't you love me anymore?" She said, pouring it on. "Don't you care?" Then, she turned and ran from the room, slamming the door to the bedroom behind her.

*Oh, hell,* Cade thought. *Should I go to her?* No. She needed some time. Hell, he needed time. He went back to his office and poured himself another glass of wine, taking deep breaths, trying to calm himself.

"You're afraid," Angel had said.

It had made him mad because it was true. The thought of showing his face to the world terrified him more than anything had ever scared him in his life. She had also been right about something else; he'd never allowed fear to control him. He never backed down from a challenge.

Angel had been right about both things, and he hated it when she was right. And even more than that, he hated admitting she was right.

Cade sipped his wine, went to the mahogany bookshelf and opened the closet doors centered in the middle of all hard-bound books. There was a mirror, and he forced himself to look at his face, really look at it. Angel had a stunning face, one he'd never stopped admiring for its feminine perfection. He stared at it now, really looked at it: the delicate nose, plump lips, big eyes beneath slender, arched eyebrows. Turning his face side to side, he rubbed at his glossy lips, the slight blush on his cheeks, wishing he could at least rub off this make-up— or what looked like make-up. He didn't want people to think he was wearing lipstick— not by choice. Did it really matter?

*"I'm gorgeous,"* he admitted, needing to say it, face it head on. "Stunning. Beautiful. And...". He finished the glass of wine, set it on the counter. "I am Cade Morehouse. Nothing can stop me. Nothing has ever stopped me, and I won't stopped by a pretty face."

Angel was right. He did need to show his face to the world, because it did terrify him, and if he didn't face this fear, he would forever live in fear and shame.

## Chapter Fifteen

I stood in front of our full-length mirror in a three-piece power suit, adjusting my cufflinks. I had my hair combed back and up, my signature style, and with Angel standing next to me, her long hair flowing freely, I took some solace in the fact that I looked at least a little more butch than she did.

A little.

"We better get going," Angel said, brushing a tiny ball of lint from my shoulder. "I'm so proud of you for doing this."

I grabbed her shoulders and pulled her in for a kiss. She stiffened. I could tell she was still uncomfortable kissing me, but I was still **the man**, and I was determined to be me. As I held her and lingered in the kiss, she relaxed into me, pressing her body against mine. When the kiss ended, she stared up at me, smiled, and then spun away with a giggle.

In the car, we went over the talking points that Isabella had prepared. The plan was for Isabella to address the media first, explaining the background—the surgery...etc... and then Angel and I would walk out together. We'd talk about how it was a very trying time for us, but that it had only brought us closer yadayadayada...

Isabella had provided a bunch of data justifying the strategy, and I gave it a quick glance. I didn't really care. I just wanted to face the world and get back to living my life.

Our car pulled around to the back of the building where Isabelle had her office. We didn't want anyone to see us before the big reveal. As we got out of the car, Isabella gave me a hug. "You are so brave," she said.

"Let's get this over with," I said, taking her hand, walking with her into the back door, making our way to the service elevator. Isabella and her assistant, Taylor, waited for us at the elevator, and I saw the stunned look on their faces as their eyes darted back and forth between my face and Angel's. Isabella seemed on the verge of saying something, then seemed to think better of it and reached her hand out toward me. "Cade." I was still taller than Angel, so she could tell which twin was me.

I took her hand and gave it a firm shake. "Isabella."

She led us toward the office. "You both good? Any questions?"

"I'm good," I said.

"Ready to roll," Angel said.

"You'll wait here while I read the statement," Isabella said. "When I am done, Taylor will open the door, you come in and you know what to say."

"Got it," I said, feeling more and more detached. The whole thing seemed surreal, like a dream.

Isabelle left. I stood, waiting. Checked my watch. Made sure my cell phone was turned off. I glanced at the exit, thought about just walking out before I faced the world and let them see me. Once I walked out, there would be no going back. Things would change forever. But, no. I'd come this far. I needed to do this.

The door opened, and Taylor waved us in. Angel started to walk through first, but I put a hand on her shoulder, stepped past her and walked into the room, head held high. As Angel walked in behind me, I heard gasps, murmurs. There were lights everywhere, TV cameras, still cameras. I could hear them whirring and clicking. I took my position on the podium, stood and faced the room, faced the world for the first time with Angel's face. I was surprised how many people were there and thought, *must be a slow news night*. Angel took her position at my side and reporters started shouting questions.

Isabella stepped in front and bellowed, "Knock it off! I TOLD you no questions until after they make their statements!" Her New York accent came through extra strong when she was mad, and the room grew quiet.

I stood, staring out at the room while Isabella read her lines from the teleprompter. The reporters were mostly women, and it seemed to me they were looking at me, sometimes turning to whisper in each other's ears, glancing back. They had a look in their eyes—was it pity? I had never had a person look at me like that, let alone a woman. I had been a good-looking man, and women had always looked at me with respect and desire. I guessed that was over, for now. I thought I heard someone whisper, "He's so pretty."

Angel finished her statement, and now all eyes really were on me. Words appeared on the teleprompter. Words I was supposed to say. They would have seen my pretty face. They would now hear my pretty voice. I had decided not to hide it. Not to hide anything. I took a sip of water and stepped to the microphone. "As you can imagine," I said, and the media gasped, seemed to step back. I heard my voice coming back to me over the monitors. I hadn't heard it from outside my head, and it was worse than I thought to hear it now, the way other people heard it. It was high and buzzy—impossibly feminine.

I straightened my back. This was how I looked, how I sounded. I would not apologize for it. I was still Cade Morehouse.

I took another sip of water. "As you can imagine," I repeated, "this has been a very trying time...". I read on, feeling stronger with every word, with every moment I stood there facing the world as I was.

I finished my statement. The reporters asked questions. Angel answered most of them. I stood in a power stance, legs wide, arms at my sides. Isabella called an end to it, and I felt Angel take my hand and pull me from the podium, through the door which Taylor closed behind us. "Great," Isabella said. "You guys were both great. That couldn't have gone any better."

"Babe!" Angel said, hugging me again. "We killed it out there."

"I am satisfied with the performance," I said, keeping my reserve, feeling restored, once more the man. Angel and Isabella talked. I was thinking about my meetings in the morning with clients, feeling the old confidence coming back. I would win them all over. I knew that now. Nothing could stop me.

Eventually, Angel took my hand and we walked out, got in the car and went home.

## Chapter 16

Kimmy had gone in the front door with the other media people, but then peeled off and made her way around to the back entrance. She trusted her gut, and everything about the way the event had been staged suggested to her the coming and going would happen at the back entrance. She found a hiding spot and waited, snapping pictures of the Angels as they got out of their car, hugged, and then when they came out after, holding hands. "That's sweet," she thought. "Maybe they really are sisters?"

As soon as she got home, she plugged her camera into the computer, downloaded the pics and sent them raw to *Scandal*. Usually she did some photo-shopping before submitting pics, but she knew speed was essential. She sat back with a sigh. Once again, she thought, Kimmy scoops the world! The image of the two Angels walking hand and hand glowed on the screen of her laptop, and she stared in awe at how beautiful they were. She wondered what it would be like to kiss someone that pretty.

## Chapter 17

After a celebratory glass of wine, Angel yawned, said she was wiped out and went to bed. I stood in the living room, staring through the big glass window, looking down on the lights of LA, so far below. I could see the reflection of my lovely face in the glass, superimposed over the city. I smiled, thinking of Leigh. Had she thought she would destroy me with this? Nothing could destroy me.

What doesn't kill me makes me stronger.

## Chapter 18

*Well, maybe not physically stronger*, I thought, as my tiny arms trembled. I was trying to do a push-up, straining to lower myself to the floor. My chest touched the rubberized flooring in our home gym, and I pushed up, as I had done so many times before, but this time I rose only an inch off the floor, making a little squeak as I strained, and then collapsed back to the ground.

“Shit.”

I couldn't even do a single push-up. I rolled onto my side, got to my knees. Fine. Fine. I would get my strength back in time. For now, I just wanted to get the blood flowing, get myself pumped for work. I would just do some cardio, I decided, getting onto Angel's treadmill and running. Glancing in the mirror, I saw myself in my tank top, shorts. I looked like a woman, with my rounded shoulders, slim arms.



Just another challenge, I decided. I would put the muscle back on in time. I ran and ran, pumping my legs, until I felt the endorphins rush, lost myself in the rhythm of my workout. As I was finishing up, sweat glittering on my round little shoulders, Angel came in, stopped and stared at me. I could tell she was shocked to see how I looked in my workout gear, how skinny. How female.

“Morning, gorgeous,” I said, determined to assert myself against the world, to be ME not matter how I looked.

“Morning,” Angel said, forcing a smile. “Good run?”

“Yeah,” I said, grabbing my towel, wiping the sweat from my face. “Fucking great.”

Angel circled me, got on the treadmill and started running. She wore a sports bra and a pair of short shorts. She looked hot as hell, even first thing in the morning, and I watched her, appreciating her perfect body—the way her tight ass bounced as she ran, her breasts, her ponytail swishing side to side. I felt myself getting hard and resolved to take her to bed tonight, remind her that I was still a man where it mattered. As I left the gym, I held the image of her perfect body in my mind, grabbing my junk and giving it a squeeze. I grunted, like I'd done a

thousand times before, but it sounded all wrong— more like a kitten's purr. I ignored it and gave myself another squeeze.

I felt hungry, but most of the food in the kitchen didn't appeal to me. My appetite still seemed to have gone, so I made a protein smoothie and forced myself to drink the whole thing down even though I'd felt full after only half a glass. I needed to eat if I wanted to put on muscle, and it frustrated me I was having such a hard time getting food down. *I should probably see a doctor at some point*, I thought as I went to shower. Once things settled down, I would get to it.

Right now, I had a career to save.

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I swaggered into the office. "Good morning," I said.

Esperanza, the receptionist, looked up at me, quickly hiding her initial shock behind her professionally practiced vacuous smile. "Good morning, Mr. Morehouse?" She answered.

"Yeah," I said. "It's me. I know it's a bit of a shock." I walked past her desk and into the office. I felt eyes on me. People trying to look without being obvious they were looking. I walked back to my suite, acting like it was just another day, which it was I insisted to myself. I didn't need to look to know people were leaning close, whispering, already gossiping.

It didn't matter. I was about to show them all that nothing had changed. They would get used to the idea. I pushed through the door to my outer office, where Janice sat behind her desk, her gorgeous legs crossed. She looked up at me and stared, her mouth dropping open.

"Morning, Janice," I said.

Mr. Morehouse," she said, getting up, smoothing her skirt. "I'm so sorry... the phone call yesterday..."

"Forget about it," I said. "I don't exactly sound like myself these days." I pulled open the door to my office.

"If there's anything I can do..."

"Big day today," I said. "Let's keep the focus on our clients." I went into my office, leaving her standing there, staring after me. I smirked as I sat at my desk, pulling up the file on my first client meeting, The Colonel, as Red Walker liked to call himself. One of my oldest clients. I'd made a lot of money for him over the years, and when he came in, I would remind him of that, of the man behind the face.

Walker arrived. Janice showed him in, still laughing at some joke he'd told. I got up from behind my desk and he stopped, staring at my face, his eyes scanning my features. "God damn," he said. "I'd heard but... hell." He had a deep, rumbling bass voice, hardened by whiskey.

"It's quite a change," I said, feeling suddenly self-conscious of how high and soft I sounded now compared to him. I held out my hand. "But I assure you, I am the same man I've always been."

"Well, you sure as don't sound like the same man," he said, taking my hand, shaking, his eyes all the while fixed on my face, looking over my features. "You're



prettier than second wife, and she was a Dallas Cowboy's cheerleader."

The comment caught my off guard, but I held the firm handshake, kept my eyes locked on his. "Ex-wives, am I right?" I said. "Hell hath no fury."

The Colonel huffed, let go of my hand. "I am having a hard time believing I'm talking to Cade right now."

"Have a seat," I said, going back to my desk, determined to take control of the meeting. "Want a drink?"

"I'm fine," The Colonel said. It was the first time he'd ever declined. He still stared at my face, and even seemed to give my body a once over. It unnerved me to have him looking at me like that, like he wanted to...

But no. That was insane. He knew I was still a man. "Let's talk about your portfolio, Red," I said. "The good news is, you are doing very well, and—"

"Are you wearing make-up?"

"No," I said. "It was tattooed onto me during the surgery my ex ... inflicted on me. Now, back to your investments..."

"Let me stop you right there," Red said, sitting back, eyes still dancing across my face. "Look, I am sorry, but I don't think this is going to work for me."

"Red. We've been together for years. I've worked my ass off..."

Red laughed. "No. It's not. I just don't feel comfortable."

"I understand. It's a lot, but let me show you the numbers, talk about my plans going forward."

"No. You know I always go with my gut. I'm sorry, but I am going to take my business elsewhere."

"Just like that?" I said. "After all these years?" I winced as my emotions got the best of me and the last words came out with a higher-pitched, feminine pleading.

Red slapped his knee. "I guess so, Cade. I guess so. It's just business. I don't feel comfortable investing with a man I feel kinda like I want to fuck. Good luck." He stood and walked out without shaking my hand.

The morning did not get better. One client after another, they stared, shook their heads, and told me they would be changing income managers. I sold as hard as I ever sold, tried to get them to focus on my numbers. One even told me he couldn't trust his money to someone who sounded like a 12-year-old girl. Most took longer to work up the nerve to tell me than Red had. One even agreed to stay with me and then texted me ten minutes later to tell me I was fired. When the morning meetings ended, and it was time for lunch, I had lost every client who'd come to see me, mostly, I thought, because they didn't see *me*. They didn't see the man who'd they come to trust. They saw Angel.

I rubbed my eyes, went to my closet and opened it, looking at myself in the mirror, looking at Angel. What had I felt when I first saw her? I felt an instant animal need to protect her. She had the kind of feminine face that made men and even women want to protect her, shower her with gifts and compliments. Her face radiated feminine vulnerability, not strength.

Of course, no one would trust me to protect them, to protect their money. Looking like this, men would only want to protect me—and maybe, I thought, choking on the realization as I looked at my plump, glossy lips, get a blow job.

There were attractive women in my business, but not with faces like mine. They all had a hint of masculinity to their attractive features. I now had none.

“Fuck!” I slammed the door shut on my face, seething with rage at my own vanity and arrogance. I had been so sure that who I was inside was more important, that people would look past how I looked and remember what I’d done.

But no. I should have known better, because I had seen this face, wanted immediately to fuck the woman it belonged to, and if she had been an investment banker I never in a million years would have trusted her with my money even if she was a Harvard MBA.

I heard a knock on the door, and before I could answer Abe Goldman, the managing partner, let himself in. “Cade,” he said, trying to act like everything was normal. “How’s the golf game these days?”

For a moment I allowed myself to hope he’d come to set up a golf date, tell me I had his full support, that the firm was behind me in my time of trouble, but one look in his eyes and I felt like I’d been punched in the gut. I knew what was coming. We sat and talked. He worked around to it, telling me the firm couldn’t afford to lose all my clients, that he was asking me to do what was best for the firm and let the other men take over.

“There will be a generous severance,” he said. “Of course.”

“Of course.”

“We will need for you to prove you are really Cade Morehouse. You understand. It’s just very hard to believe.”

“I am Cade Morehouse. It doesn’t matter what I look like.”

“Well, it really does,” Abe said, holding out his hand. “Good luck.”

I shook his hand, resisting the urge to tell him to go fuck himself. He walked out, and that’s how my career ended. I felt numb and walked out of the office, ignoring Janice, whose eyes were red and who offered some comforting words I didn’t hear. I wander onto the streets of LA, the milling pedestrian traffic, just drifting along until I saw a coffee shop. I walked in and got in line. I saw people looking at me, whispering.

A young woman approached me, an embarrassed smile on her face, her cellphone in hand. She was hot—good skin, big breasts. I’d do her. “Excuse me,” she said. “I just made a bet with my friend. Are you Angel Milan?”

I sighed. Something in my broke. What was the point of fighting it? “Yes,” I said. “I *am* Angel Milan.”

She squealed. “Omigod! I am such a huge fan!” She glanced back at her friend who was hoping up and down with excitement. “Can I get a selfie?”

“Why not?” She and her friend crowded against me while other patrons held up their phones, snapping pictures. The girls thanked me, gushing. A couple people ahead of me stepped aside and let me go to the register first.

The barista looked at me in awe, her eyes wide. “You’re so pretty!” She said.

“Thanks,” I managed, feeling something twist inside me.

“So, what can I get for you, Miss? Your favorite? I follow you on Instagram.”

Miss. I smiled to hide my annoyance. “Sure. My favorite.”

“One low-fat frappe coming right up!”

I waited, took my drink and left the store, waving to the girls, the barista. I took the sip of the drink. It was girly, feminine, gross. I took another sip. It looked like I was going to have to get used to it. To all of it.

The world saw me as Angel Milan, and there was nothing I could do about it.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T.G Cooper wrote this book. T.G. lives and works on the Jersey Shore and overcame paralyzing social anxiety and [elective mutism](#) to sing and perform all over New Jersey and New York.

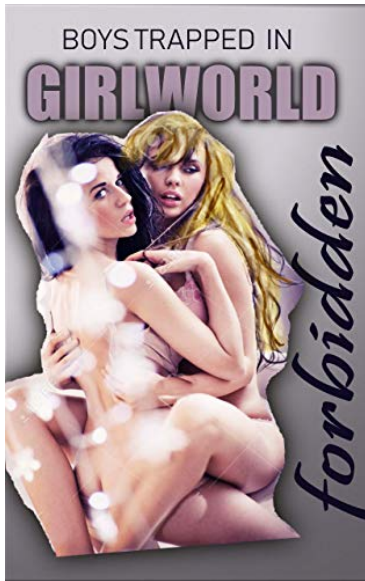
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