



TG
TALES OF
TERROR

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Swap House

“Let’s get all the gear inside,” Branigan Resolute said as soon as the vans came to a stop. “I want to be shooting in 60 minutes.”

The crew rolled their eyes. Always a big rush with this guy, and then complaints about how the work looked terrible. But they started to grab cameras and sound equipment.

Branigan jumped out of the van as well, immediately joined by his assistant, Mary Harbor, who handed him his coffee mug. Branigan took a sip. “Goddamn,” he said. “Can you fucking believe this?”

“The house does show promise,” Mary responded.

“Promise?” Branigan said. “It looks like a set from a horror movie.” Indeed, it did. Built of dark, brown stone, now stained black from years of pollution, the Denea Mansion bristled with towers and widows’ walks, gables and crooked chimneys. Think masses of gnarled vines crawled up the walls, and surrounded the thick, lead glass windows. On each corner of the roof, a stone gargoyle squatted, fanged grin flashing down on any visitors.

The interior was no less glorious. The house had been occupied by a series of shut ins ever since the founding Denea family had abandoned it back in 1867. One owner after another had bought the property, which time and again had sold for pennies on

the dollar, and time and again that new owner had ended up living in isolation from the world, a hermit, who'd kept the house unchanged, so that it was still furnished with the original furnishings from 1824, had the same wall paper, the same counters, the same wood fired iron stove. The only change that had been made in the house was the addition of gas lighting.

As Branigan stepped onto the front porch, the floorboards creaked ominously. He gave Mary a wink. "Spooky."

"Agreed."

He then pushed open the front door, which rusty hinges once again rewarded him with a horror movie groan. Branigan laughed. "This is amazing. I mean, we won't even need any sound effects."

The crew had begun to set up in the library. In addition to the floor to ceiling shelves of dirty wall to ceiling hardcover books, there was a fireplace where an assistant was busily getting a fire started, and a row of windows looking out on the wild, untamed rose garden.

Branigan, meanwhile, went into the parlor, where his makeup artist had set up. Branigan sat down. "This place is spooky," Gina, his makeup girl, said.

"It gives me the creeps," Mary agreed.

"Girls," Branigan said while Gina did his mascara. "You don't have anything to worry about. I'll protect you."

"I'm not worried," Gina said. "Just kind of unnerved."

“Okay,” Branigan said. “Just know there’s a man here to take care of you.”

Gina and Mary exchanged an annoyed glance. Gina grabbed a horsehair brush.

“Let’s give your cheeks a nice pink blush. There.”

“I’ve studied all the martial arts of the world and created my own fighting system,” Branigan went on. “I am more than capable of dealing with any threats, ladies.”

“I feel safer already,” Gina said. “Now pucker up so I can do your lipstick.”

Once he was done with makeup, Branigan checked out his clothes. He liked to look rugged and manly. He wore a thermal shirt and jeans. He had carefully groomed stubble on his face. His arms were thick and veined and etched with muscle, and he had a body builder’s hard, bulging chest. Yeah. He liked what he saw. He went back to the library. Cameras and cables crowded the space. The sun had gone down, and the gas lamps were all flicking, casting the room in a warm, fiery glow. The TV lighting had been minimized so they could capture the ambience. A fire blazed in the old stone fireplace. The crew was still working. He looked at his phone. “You have two minutes to get this shit show straightened out!” He barked at the director, Jenni Wilson.

“We’re working as fast...”

“DO IT!” Branigan screamed in her face.

Jenni turned and started barking at her crew.

Branigan sighed, turning to Mary. “Unbelievable. I have to stay on everyone. All day. Not one person can be trusted to just do their fucking job.”

“It puts you under so much pressure.”

“Exactly. You get me. You see it. I mean, I am paying these people. Why the fuck can’t they just earn their pay?”

‘Puzzling.’”

“Yeah. Puzzling.”

Mary, in fact, did not agree with Branigan’s management style at all. She taken the job because she needed money and hoped the credit would lead to something better. That had been two years ago, and so far she hadn’t found any doors opening. Branigan had told her that he liked to hire women. Publicly, he made a big deal about how he supported female directors, sound engineers. Privately, he’d admitted to Mary that he hired women because he believed they were easier to intimidate.

“That’s time,” Branigan said, walking onto what was now the set. “Let’s do this. I don’t care if you think you are ready or not.”

“Just another—” Jenni started to say.

“Time is money. Let’s roll, honey.”

Jenni bit her tongue. She hated being called honey. “Quiet on the set,” she said as the last of the lighting was put into place. “And— go.”

“Today we join you from one of the most haunted places in the world, the Denae Manse. Let me read to you from the journal of its original builder, Broderick Denae.” The tech lights dimmed so now Branigan was lit only by the gas light and flames from the fireplace. “I do not know how much longer I have. I am changing. Changing into

something I fear is worse than death. I called on the old ones, the goddess Hecate, and I... I..." The pen just stops there, violently as if the author had been...."

The lights flickered. A scream filled the air, and all went dark. Branigan felt like there was something grabbing him, reshaping him as if he were made of clay. He tried to shout, but he couldn't. His mouth would make no sounds.

The lights flickered back on. The cameras, too. Branigan wobbled, woozily. "What just happened?" He asked. "Shit. Did you get that?"

Everyone, however, was staring at him with shocked expressions.

"What?"

Jenni pointed at his chest. "You're... um.. you have..."

Branigan then became aware of a new weight on his chest. Looking down, he saw he now had breasts straining against his thermal shirt. "Oh, shit." He put his arm across his chest. "Cut. Cut," he said, before turning and hurrying out of the room, totally unnerved by the jiggling sensation of his chest. Mary hurried after him.

Jenni and the other crew women stared, everyone trying to process what they'd just seen. Jenni shook her head, thinking what she thought had happened could not have happened. "Did you get any of that?" She asked Callie, the camera operator.

"I don't know," Callie said.

It was a small crew by TV standard. Jenni and Callie, a second camera operator, Smitty, a sound tech who held the boom mic, Erin, and the lightning designer, Talia. Oh, yeah. And Marcie, the intern right out of film school. They all crowded around

the monitor. The shoot was all digital, so Jenni rolled it back to just before the lights went out.

There was Branigan. “That shot does look good,” Jenni said. Callie nodded. Branigan was reciting his lines: “I called on the old ones, the goddess Hecate, and I... I...’ The pen just stops there, violently as if the author had been....”

The scream, like an unearthly howl, the flicker, the light went out, but then— Jenni froze the image. “What the hell is that?”

The women all crowded close to the screen. It looked like a woman’s face had appeared in the darkness behind Branigan. She was pale— too pale— with dark eyes and red lips. The image was semi-transparent. They could see the mantle through the pale skin. “I don’t know,” Callie said. “I didn’t put it there.”

“It does almost look fake,” Jenni said. She slowly advanced the recording. A pair of hands appeared on Branigan’s chest, squeezing, lifting, molding what looked like two swelling breasts— women’s breasts.

Then all the lights coming back on. The image fuzzing as the camera adjusted to the sudden light, and then Branigan standing there, those big, proud breasts stretching out the front of his shirt, asking, “What just happened?” Jenni froze the image. “Those— what are they? D cups?”

“Yeah. I kind of didn’t believe this was even real,” Callie said.

“Poor guy,” Smitty said. “Are they real, though? Is this place really haunted?”

The women all looked around, feeling suddenly nervous, unsure. They rewound the recording to watch it again, still not believing their eyes.

Branigan was standing in front of a bathroom mirror, his shirt lifted as he stared at his big, pink nipples, the rounded white breasts that now bobbed on his chest. They were huge, and they felt even bigger than they looked. “Boss?” Mary called from outside the door.

Branigan pulled his thermal shirt down, irked by how tight it felt, stretching across his new ass. “Yeah?”

“I’m not sure what I just saw. You okay?”

“Yeah,” Branigan lied. He had a sudden burst of hope. Maybe no one would believe what they’d just seen. The thought of all these women seeing him with breasts— especially these babies— sickened. They would lose all respect for him, he felt. No. But, Mary’s words gave him some hope. “Bring me my jacket,” he said.

“Jacket. Why??”

“Mary. Do what I asked. No questions.”

Mary hurried off. Branigan stared in the mirror, shaking his head in horror. It was impossible, and he was humiliated and disgusted. This couldn’t be real, he decided. A guy didn’t just pop out a pair of tits. He pulled off his shirt, feeling his breasts sway and bounce. He looked in the mirror trying to spot a seam, something to suggest they were fake breasts, that someone had somehow attached them to his chest. But— nothing. He covered his nipples with his palms and squeezed— and he felt his hands

on his nipples, felt his breasts being squeezed... “Oh, God,” he said, pulling his hands away. “Fuck.”

Every time he moved, his breasts swayed and jiggled. The sensation was unnerving. Unmanning. With no better ideas, he pulled his thermal shirt back on, then wrapped his arms around his chest, trying to keep it from moving. Where the hell was Mary?

There was a gentle knock on the door. “I have your jacket.”

“Okay. I’m going to open the door. Just a crack. Pass it in. Then, I want you to clear the hall between here and that first bedroom.”

Branigan cracked open the door and Mary pushed his jacket through. Branigan immediately yanked it shut.

“Boss, the crew is kinda freaking out after what happened. They are asking that we scrub the shoot.”

Branigan slipped on his sports coat and tried to pull it shut, but his tits were too big. They refused to be contained. “Yeah. Yeah. Um, okay, let me just get myself sorted out. Tell them— tell them to just shoot some of the rooms and things while I take care of something. We’ll lose a fortune if we just scrub.”

“Okay.”

“Tell me when the hall is clear.”

As soon as Mary indicated the hall was clear, Branigan pulled his coat as tightly closed as he could, then hunched over in an effort to hide his chest, rushing from the

bathroom down the hall to the bedroom and slamming the door closed as soon as he entered. He heard footsteps on the second floor. Muffled voices. He pulled his jacket off and went to the old, ornate full-length mirror in the corner, once more shaking his head and staring in disbelief at his melons. “This will destroy me if it gets out,” he mumbled. “I can’t be seen like this.” He decided he needed to bind them— use something to tie them down.

Meanwhile, Jenni and Callie had snuck around the outside of the house while Smitty and Erin had gone upstairs to shoot footage. They came to the window outside the room where Branigan was hiding just in time to see him pull off his shirt, revealing his magnificent, gravity-defying breasts. They looked at each other, struggling to believe it was real, even as Branigan yanked a sheet off the bed.

Just then, the gas lamps in the room extinguished, and it filled with an eerie green light. The same image of a pale woman appeared, this time seeming to rise out of a large, oak armoire, and she had something in her hand. There was the sound of a woman’s scream, followed by Branigan shouting in fright, backing away.

Jenni and Callie stood frozen, the camera locked on the action. Neither had ever seen anything truly paranormal in their lives, and the sight of this== ghost? Apparition? Demon? Paralyzed them with fear.

They watched as it tried to wrap whatever it was holding around Branigan. He struggled, threw fists, but the specter persisted until finally they saw that it had fitted a corset around Branigan’s body...

The door to the room rattled, there was pounding. “Branigan!” Mary yelled.

“What the hell?” Branigan said looking down, not even sure what this strange garment had been wrapped around his waist. Then the stays on the back of the corset yanked— tight— and he gasped as he felt his waist being crushed— “Stop! No! You’re—” The stays yanked even tighter, and it was as if he’d been punched in the gut, all the air knocked out of him. Branigan stumbled.

Jenni and Callie watched as invisible hands tied the stays. Branigan spun and faced the window, his eyes looking lost, unfocused, and they were stunned to see the corset had molded him into an hourglass shape, with a slender waist and rounded hips, the top lifting his breasts, squeezing them together, giving him the deepest, softest cleavage they’d ever seen...

Now the doors to the armoire burst open as a gust of wind began to swirl around the room... petticoats and stockings and ribbons and slips and a wig and shoes and a dress all floated out of the armoire and began to swirl around Branigan like a pack of bats.

“No...” Branigan said, batting weakly at the feminine finery, but the wind that had filled the room began to turn him, making him spin and spin... and with each turn Jenni and Callie saw another layer of women’s clothes fit itself upon his body... until finally the wind slowed, and Branigan spun in an old-fashioned dress, the skirts flying out as he stumbled weakly, now with long brown hair tied back with a pink ribbon... His face smooth, lips glistening with pink lipstick...

The door burst open, and Mary rushed into the room, just managing to catch Branigan as he put the back of his hand to his forehead and fainted into her arms.

Callie and Jenni, unfrozen from their fear, looked at each other, then back inside at what looked like a woman being laid on the bed my Mary. Just then, there was a crack of thunder and merciless bolt of lightning cracked the sky. Rain began to fall.

Chapter Two

Branigan heard voices. Distant, muffled voices, as if they were coming to him from a seashell. “Is he a— a guy still?”

“I’m not sure.”

“Should we, um, check?”

“I don’t think so.”

“I wouldn’t even believe she was Branigan if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.”

“I am freaking out. This is insane.”

Branigan’s eyes fluttered open. He saw the crew crowded around him. “Where am I?” He asked, his hand immediately going to his throat as he heard a soft, lilting voice come from his lips. Looking at his hand, he saw he was wearing a white, lace glove. “What the fuck?” Trying to take a deep breath, his chest heaved as the corset prevented him from breathing any deeper than his chest, and he looked down to see his smooth, creamy breasts framed in the plunging lace collar of a— “dress? Why am I wearing a dress?”

So distracted was he by the humiliating changes to his body and the female attire he found himself wearing, it didn’t even register as he brushed his long bangs out of his eyes, trying to get up from the bed, finding he could barely move his upper body for the constraining power of his corset.

“Calm down,” Mary said. “Let me help.” She started to take his arm, but he batted it away, half rolling off the bed and immediately stumbling as he tried to find his

footing in his new, high-heeled shoes, almost falling over only to be once more caught by Mary, who steadied him. His new feeling of helplessness scared and enraged him, and he looked up at Mary meaning to scream at her, but as he realized he was looking up at her his world seemed to spin, and he glanced at the mirror, then looked back and stared at what looked like a stunning young woman in an off pink dress, with a banging figure...

His mouth dropped open, and he batted his long, curly lashes. "That's not me," he said, horrified as her mouth moved. He stopped carefully toward the mirror, wobbling on his heels, waving, and watched as she wobbled and waved. "Oh, fuck no! NO!" He started hyperventilating, his chest heaving, and he screamed! Mary got there just in time to catch him as he fainted one more.

"You guys, clear the room. I'll try to calm her— him? Down when she wakes up again."

The crew started heading toward the door. Jenni glanced at Callie, who gave her a thumbs up. She'd captured the whole thing. The crew had decided to camp down in the parlor for the night, everyone staying together. They were all freaked out by what had happened, the presence of something supernatural right here in the house. But the storm had knocked out the only bridge to Denea Manor, and they'd reluctantly realized they were going to be forced to stay the night. Now, Jenni gathered them all into a tight little circle. "Guys," she said. "I want to run something by you all."

They all nodded.

“Callie has footage of all this,” she said. “The first change. The dress. The scene just now.”

“I got some good sound,” Erin said.

“What? You did?” Jenni asked.

“We are upstairs right over the room. When I heard all the commotion, I put the mic to the floor.”

“You are amazing!” Jenni said.

“Hey. I do the job.”

“Here’s the thing,” Jenni said. “I’m pretty sure Branigan Haunts is over as a show. I mean— look at him. So, we have all this footage.”

“You want to sell it to someone else?” Erin said, catching on.

“I think we could get some good money for this.”

Marcie, the intern, raised her hand.

“Yes?”

“Is that, like, legal or something? I mean. I signed a contract.”

“Oh,” Jenni said. “You are adorable, and you have a lot to learn.”

“So, it is legal?” Marcie said, relieved.

“Not at all,” Jenni said. “Branigan Productions owns all this footage. But, in his current state? I think I could get him to sign it over.”

“And then we sell one of the biggest news stories of the decade,” Callie said.

“And we use the money, and here’s the part I’m hoping you’ll get super excited about, to start our own production company.”

“Wow. Yeah. Cool,” the women all agreed.

Marcie still looked a little unsure. “Marcie?” Jenni said. “I want you on board with this.”

“I’m just— well— I mean, aren’t we taking advantage of her? Him? Because, you know, he’s been feminized?”

“Yes,” Jenni said. “Yes, we are. And how does being promoted from intern to assistant director sound to you?”

Marcie’s eye lit up. “Assistant director?”

“And don’t worry. I have plans to take care of Branigan as well.”

“Well, then, I love this!”

They all cheered quietly. “Okay, then,” Jenni said. “Here’s what I want you all to do.”

Branigan’s eyes once more fluttered open. He once more looked down to see his soft, milk white cleavage. Mary was at his bedside, holding his hand. “Just try and stay calm,” she said in a soothing voice. “You fainted again.”

The news that he’d fainted just like some frail female from an outdated romance novel made Branigan feel sick— just as sick as the thought that his body had been changed, his voice. None of it seemed possible, despite what he’d seen in the mirror. “Is this real?” He asked in his pretty voice.

“It’s real,” Mary said. “I know it doesn’t seem possible, but it’s real.”

Branigan squeezed his legs together. He couldn’t feel his junk, but with his corset keeping his back straight, he couldn’t reach down to feel for it either. The thought that it was gone, that he was a woman, horrified him. “Am I? Did the changes?”

“Yes,” Mary said. “You are—you have a woman’s body now.”

The reality hit Branigan like a hammer, and he was disgusted to find himself weeping, covering his face in shame as the sobs shook his body. Mary held his hand, and murmured, “there, there. There, there.” She let him cry himself out, and when the tears started to subside, she handed him a lace hanky.

Branigan daubed at the corners of his eyes, not even aware of how sweetly feminine he looked. Then, he swallowed and looked at Mary. “Kill me,” he said. “I can’t live like this.”

“I thought you were a man?” Mary said.

Branigan slit his pretty eyes. “I am. I was. Look at me.”

“A man doesn’t run from his problems. A man doesn’t abandoned his crew, people who are all counting on him. A man is tough, and he faces whatever life throws at him.”

All of the things Mary had said were words Branigan, himself, had spoken. They were part of his code. “But— how? Now that I’m like this? No one will believe this is me— and I don’t want anyone to ever see me like this. I’m dead, anyway, Mary.”

“Don’t be so dramatic,” Mary said. “You are very much alive. I need you to be brave. Can you do that for me?”

“I don’t know,” Branigan said.

“I’ll get you through this,” Mary said. “I have a plan, and Jenni and all the girls are rallying around you. They want to help you— adjust. All we need from you is a for you to hope.”

The words touched Branigan. The thought that the whole team cared, that they were pulling for him? His girl’s heart fluttered, and he felt a rush of new emotions unlike any he’d ever felt before. “Okay,” he said, crying again, but this time tears of relief, tears of hope. “I’ll try.”

“That’s my girl.” Mary took his hand and pulled him from the bed. “Now, come with me.”

Branigan followed. Mary led him to the parlor, where Jenni was Callie stood close together, talking. As Mary entered, pulling a bashful Branigan behind, they stopped talking and looked at him, still struggling to believe it was HIM.

No one knew what to say. It was all very odd, but Jenni’s years directing took over as she focused on the task at hand, tuning out the side issue that their host was now a very pretty young woman. “Take her — Branigan— to the van. Drive off the property. We don’t think this spirit can leave the confines of the estate.”

“Why not?” Mary said, taking the electronic key fob from Jenni.

“I’ll explain later. No one else has been affected, but we’re just finishing shooting, grabbing some materials, and then we are all getting out of here.”

Branigan wanted to say something. He was used to being in charge. But whether it was part of the magic that had changed him, or merely the fact that finding himself in a corset and a dress, with a young woman’s soft voice, he found he couldn’t speak out the way he used to. Instead, he meekly raised his hand, waiting for permission to speak.

“Go,” Jenni said, not even noticing his dainty hand slightly raised at his side. “Before something else happens.”

“Pardon?” Branigan said, his voice almost a whisper.

“Sweetie, this is not the time,” Jenni said, pushing him toward the door. “We just need to get you to safety.”

“Um. okay,” Branigan said as Mary dragged him toward the front door, where they found Marcie waiting with a big umbrella. Branigan froze at the door, shaking his head side to side. “No. I can’t,” he said. “I should— I’m just going to stay here. I can’t face the world like this.”

“That’s what happened to all the men before you,” Marcie said.

“What? I thought the house had been occupied by a succession of old maids,” Branigan said.

“The house was bought by a series of men. Each one moved here, only to go missing after leaving the house to a woman. The journals we found show they were

the women. They were all changed, and they spent the rest of their lives hiding here, living in seclusion, too ashamed to show their faces.”

“I understand that,” Branigan said. “I do. I— I feel like the spirit is done with me. I’ll just stay here and...”

Slap!

Branigan put his hand to his cheek in shock. Mary had just slapped him across the face. “Buck up! We need you! Let’s go.” With that, she grabbed his hand and dragged him through the door, the three of them huddling under the umbrella as they dashed through the rain and leapt into the van. Marcie ran back to the house, while Mary put the van in gear and pulled out, headlights sweeping across the moldering stone walls as they dashed into the night.

Chapter Three

Mary and Jenni stood at the front of the conference table. The crew was there, drinking coffee, picking at the Danishes and donuts that crowded trays in the middle of the table. On the screen, the words Jenniry Productions with their symbol: Diana slaying a stag. Branigan sat at the other end of the table. He looked gorgeous in a red dress, legs crossed, hands in his lap. His face was perfectly made up, and he had a necklace that nestled right in the midst of his cleavage.

“Great news, everyone. Netflix loved the Lady Maker footage so much, they not only bought the movie, but a 13-episode series featuring our own lovely Miss Resolute.”

Everyone clapped. Branigan plastered a pretty smile on his face. Mary had arranged for him to take lessons in feminine deportment, and he was doing quite well. The crew had shot the whole house, and then Branigan had done narration in front of a green screen, later merged into the footage so it seemed like he had stayed in the house after his transformation and finished the show. Of course, it was the footage of him being changed that had set the world on fire. Rumors had spread, many claiming it was all fake, that there was no way this girl was the world-famous ghost hunter Branigan Resolute. His family was trying to have him declared dead. He'd been forced to try and prove that he was this woman, forcing him to go public in a big way when all he'd wanted to do was hide from the whole world.

Branigan didn't understand how it had happened— not just the body change, but how he'd found himself losing control of it all, Jenni and Mary stepping him as he was reduced to a pretty face that spent most meetings just smiling and nodding, agreeing to whatever they told him. The spell had lingering effects. He'd found it impossible to go anywhere unless he was wearing a corset and a dress, and his hair and makeup had to be perfect at all times, or he would suffer the worst anxiety attacks. He was pretty sure the women loved seeing him like this. But what choice did he have?"

While Jenni laid out the details of their next shoot— focusing on the technical issues, Mary came back to Branigan. "Let's have a quick chat about your look," she said. Branigan offered his arm. He found it hard to stand on his own squeezed into

his infernal, 19th century corsets. Mary smiled as she helped the dainty little man to his feet. “Those shoes are adorable,” she said, seeing his white pump.

“Thanks,” Branigan sang, smiling brightly as he’d been trained to do. Mary led him to her office. Helped him sit. “So, the execs have some ideas for your look and character, and I have to tell you I am so excited.”

“Look?” Branigan said, not liking the sound of it.

“The thing is,” Mary said. “Sex sells.”

Epilogue

“And go!” Jenni said.

Branigan, wearing a corset dress that showed off his soft round shoulder and pretty little arms, that pushed his abundant breasts up and made them seem even bigger, tossed his newly blonde hair and put a hand on his hip. “This is, like, so scary!” He said, standing in front of a dilapidated building in downtown Boston. “Omigod! I can’t even tell you. I can feel the spiritual energy!” He turned and walked toward the building, letting his hips sway seductively. Then, he looked back over his shoulder, smiled and said, “Come on. Let’s get naughty!”

“Got it. Moving on!” Jenni said.

As the crew started to move the gear and set up the next shot, Jenni walked past Branigan, touching his gently on the arm. “Great job, babe. So sexy.”

Branigan let the smile drop from his face. Mary came, putting a hand on the small of his back and guiding him toward hair and makeup. “Let’s get you touched up.”

“This is ridiculous!” Branigan squeaked in feminine rage. “I feel like a bimbo.”

Mary hid her smile. “Not at all. You come across as a strong, powerful woman.”

“Really?” Branigan said. He’d become quite naive.

“Absolutely,” Mary said. “You’re scoring so high in all our demographics. Men want you, and woman want to be you!”

Marcie hurried into the scene carrying a kitten. “We need a quick shot of Brandi and her new kitten, Mischief, for social media.” Marcie handed the kitten to Branigan, who had no choice but to cradle it in his arms.

“Brandi?” He said, as an assistant came up and started shooting pictures. “Smile! Now turn! Profile! Look away. Now look at the camera with ‘fuck me’ eyes.”

Branigan followed all the instructions effortlessly. They’d made him take modeling classes.

“Our research showed the audience preferred for you to have a more feminine name,” Mary said absently while she checked her texts.

“Shouldn’t I be able to pick my own name?” Branigan said.

“Sure, sure. We’ll talk about it later.” Mary guided Brandi to the makeup tent.

“Get Brandi ready for an indoor shoot,” Mary said. “Here’s the lighting palette.”

“On it,” the make-up artist said.

“Mary!” Brandi called as he dutifully sat, legs crossed, hands in lap. “I want to talk now.”

“Bye, doll,” Mary said, blowing him a kiss. “You look gorgeous.”

Brandi stared at her as she left, slitting his eyes in girlish rage. “No one listens to me,” he said.

“That’s because they are too busy looking at your fine ass,” the make-up artists said, as she cleaned off the outdoor makeup on Brandi’s face.

Brandi sighed. It was her life now. She felt small and powerless all the time. People told her what to wear, what color to dye her hair, what to say, how to walk, how to talk. She’d never been more famous and more popular, and she’d never felt like less of a person.

Remember

Bonnie Love. Putting her dirty blonde hair up in a messy bun, smiling at herself in the mirror, admiring her dimples. On her wrist, a tattoo: the word *breath* in cursive.

Yeah, she's that girl.

As she is fixing her hair, shaking her body to the music in her head— Abba's Name of the Game—

A face. In the mirror. Behind her. A voice says, "Remember."

She screams and cowers, curling up in a corner of the bathroom, arms wrapped around herself, but— there's no one there.

"Babe? You okay?" It's her boyfriend, Victor, and at the sight of him she leaps to her feet and throws herself into his arms, sobbing.

Victor is so attentive. He calms her down, holds her, wipes her tears. When she's finally calm and only when he feels she's okay, he asks, "What happened?"

Bonnie saw a man in the mirror. He was tall, with a thick, bushy beard and dark, piercing eyes. It had looked like he was standing behind her, and there was this look in his eyes— anger. Hate. She thought for sure he wanted to hurt her, but then— there had been no one there. She started to explain it all to Victor, but then something in her told her— no. He'll think you're crazy, and he'll leave you. She loved him so much, and she couldn't stand the thought of losing him.

So, she lies. It's a little white lie, she tells herself, and she's not hurting anyone, so it's okay. "Anxiety attack," she says. "You must think I am such a silly."

Victor kisses her, tightens his hug. "I love you, silly and all," he says. "I gotta go to work. You gonna be okay?"

“Yeah,” Bonnie says, wondering how she ever got so lucky to have such a perfect man.

Bonnie cycles through her sun salutation. The yoga class is crowded today. She feels the energy of all the other women, and it is good to be here and be surrounded by good, female vibes. They move together as Regan, the teacher, leads them through the process, going from downward dog to a forward bend, and then standing upright. Bonnie looks at herself in the mirror, smiling the brightly dimpled smile, and —

—he’s there, again. The man with the beard, standing right behind her, reaching toward her neck with big, powerful hands.

Bonnie screams again, and then her body goes limp, and she collapses to the floor. Regan runs up, checking on her, saying, “Call 911. Call 911.”

By the time the paramedics arrive, Bonnie is sitting up, sipping Smart Water. She’s embarrassed but feels fine. She knows there was no one in the mirror, that she imagined it— again. “You should really come in, get checked out,” Ann, the EMT says. “It’s better to be safe.”

“I skipped breakfast,” Bonnie lies. “Just, you know, being a little careless? I’m sure I’m fine?”

The paramedics shrug and leave, neither annoyed nor pleased. It’s just a job. Regan takes Bonnie’s hand. “What happened?” She says. “Really?”

Bonnie is touched. Regan is so empathic. She can feel everything. “I actually— I guess it was a hallucination or something. I thought I saw a creep behind me, reaching for me...”

“Okay. That is so not okay,” Regan says. “You need a cleanse.”

As Bonnie leaves, Regan watches her, perplexed. Bonnie is walking with a wide, almost clumsy stance, and not her usual feminine gait. She looks like a bow-legged cowboy.

Wrong. Bonnie feels— wrong. The way her yoga pants hug her legs and her ass. The feeling of her bra. The loose hairs tickling her neck. As she walks back to her apartment, she keeps tugging at her bra, her pants. She keeps brushing her hair away, and her movements are so sudden and annoyed and aggravated it looks to people passing as if she is being attacked by a swarm of flying ants.

Back in her apartment, she strips out of the clothes— they were sweaty anyway, and takes a shower, and the feeling of wrongness is only stronger, and it's like this isn't her body, and the way it moves and feels is making her feel sick.

Bonnie stands at the dresser she shares with Victor, but she has opened his underwear drawer. She's staring at his boxer briefs, but she is not thinking about how cute he looks in them, she is thinking about how badly she wants to wear them. But, no. She doesn't wear men's clothes. It's not her thing, though she totally supports the right of women to dress how they want...

A hand. On her elbow. Just brushing her skin. "Remember."

She screams, spins, is surprised and not surprised to find no one there. She catches a glimpse of herself in the mirror on the other side of the room, and he is there, behind her, reaching. "Leave me alone!" She yells. "Go away!"

A shape begins to take form now, and not in the mirror. She sees shadows gathering, swirling, taking on a humanoid form. "Remember."

Bonnie runs for the spare bedroom. Her crystals are there. Her candles and incense. She can feel the cold behind her, the phantom hands reaching for her... stumbling into the spare room, she lunges for a basket on the shelf. It's filled with green peridot, and Bonnie remembers that it provides protection, purity. She clutches it to her chest. "Go!" She shouts. "Go! Please!"

The shadow shape begins to dissolve, disperse, tendrils fading away like smoke on a breezy day, but then she hears that same voice, and it's barely a whisper, and she is not even sure she heard it, but she thinks it says, "Good."

Bonnie's heart races, and she doesn't understand the what she thinks she heard, but she knows the spooky phantom is gone. She clutches the peridot in her hand, and she realizes she is naked and cold. Back in the bedroom, she puts on Victor's underwear, a pair of his jeans, rolling up the legs, a t-shirt and one of his flannel shirts. She doesn't struggle or question it any longer. It just feels right, and she is starting to think more clearly, feel more confident even though her body feels ever more WRONG. She hasn't thought this clearly — ever? It's like someone somehow removed her scatterbrain setting and gave her a better operating system.

And so many things occur to her as she finishing buttoning up the flannel shirt. Like how fucked her relationship with Victor really is. Like how he, yeah, protects her, but also micromanages every aspect of her life. The way he treats her like a child or a doll to be handled and managed and mollified and why the fuck did she think that was a good thing?

Bonnie shoves the peridot into her pocket. "Fuck," she says. "I need a drink." She goes and pours herself a glass of Victor's 20-year-old scotch. He never let her try it, kept telling her it was too strong for a girl, she wouldn't like it. She sips. "Lying asshole," she thinks. "This shit is hella good."

She sees the word "breath" on her wrist and rubs at it, annoyed. "Stupid," she says. "Women and their bullshit." The words surprise her. In fact, she doesn't sound

at all like herself— the cadence of her speech, the word choice, she was all about being bright and sweet and adorable, right?

“Fuck that,” she says now, and she feels like she is waking up from a bad dream. Her arm brushes against her chest, and she frowns. It’s all wrong. This body is all wrong. Why? Why does she feel this way?

She thinks about Victor’s closet. The locked closet. The one she’d been told she was never allowed to go into. She’d never even asked why. She’d just smiled and nodded because, okay sweetie, I love you so much. The memory sickened him now. How could she have let him dictate so much to her?

She feels it. The call of that locked door. The closet. There are answers in there, things she needs to know. And yet— fear. Terror. Growing terror because she knows that if she opens that door, sees what he’s hiding inside, it will destroy her world forever. It will destroy them forever.

Yes. She’d been his life-size Barbie doll, but her life was easy. She didn’t have to think. Make decisions beyond what to do with her hair every morning. He made all the decisions for both of them, and was that so bad?

She pulled the peridot from her pocket. She’d get rid of the stone. Whatever weirdness had come over her would go away. She’d tell Victor what was happening. He’d know what to do. He’d explain it all and make it go away, and even if the whole explanation was nothing but a lie, she would feel happy and safe and what was more important than that?

“Remember.”

She turned and saw the man, now reflected in the shimmering silver of their stainless-steel refrigerator. He was pointing toward the closet. “Remember.”

Bonnie swallowed. She looked at the door to the closet. She put the stone back into her pocket. “Remember.” She heard the lock tumble over, and watched as the door swung open, revealing a black space beyond. Bonnie walked toward the door.

She couldn't stop trembling, and she was scared, so scared, but she had to know. Bonnie, the sweet girl, started to cry, and she was murmuring no... no... no... struggling to stop herself, to keep herself from the truth.... She reached once more for the stone...

Part II

Victor walked into the living room, and his mouth dropped open. Bonnie was curled on the couch in a black negligee that clung to every sweet curve of that perfect body. She smiled, her wet, red lips catching the light from the fireplace. "Hey, sweetie," she said in a low, sexy voice. "I missed you."

Victor grinned back. He was quite pleased to see her being so utterly Bonnie. Her little incident that morning had gotten him a little concerned that maybe the spell was wearing off somehow. "Let me show you how much I missed you," he said. They met in a kiss and Bonnie handed him a glass of champagne. Victor took a drink.

Part III

Wrists tied to bedpost. Ankles, too. Cold air against the skin of Victor's naked body. The smell of rose oil and Dragon's Blood incense. He remembered those smells. He opened his eyes, still groggy from the drugs. A man stood there, holding a book in his hands, a man with dark eyes and a big, bushy beard.

"Blake," Victor said, terror flooding his body at the sight of the man. "It's not what you think."

"Yes, it is," Blake answered.

"Nebula cerebrum!" Victor hissed.

"You say something?" Blake said.

“Nebula cerebrum! Nebula! Hmmpff!” Blake shoved a pair of balled up panties into Victor’s mouth. “I took precautions. Now, let’s get to work. “

He began to cast the spell, chanting in chthonic tongue, the ancient language of the fallen gods. Victor struggled, yanking at his bindings, his body bucking and slamming into the mattress as he struggled to get free, to escape his fate, his shouts of rage rising higher and higher in pitch as he felt himself being given a new shape.

Power

Jeffrey Sonnet did not hate his life; he did not love it, either. Rather, he endured it. His life, it should be said, was not awful. He worked as an attorney at a law firm in New York City, where he made a good living. He had a wife who was supportive and loving. Did they argue sometimes? Indeed. They were, as I have said, husband and wife. The pair in an apartment they had bought on the Upper East Side, and if Jeffrey stood at the very far right of his small balcony and leaned out as far as he could, he was able to see just a sliver of the East River.

But Jeffrey wanted more. He had failed to make partner at his law firm, and though he was a valued member of the team, much regarded for his legal skills, the reason had been made clear to him: he did not bring in business.

Jeffrey simmering discontent with his life boiled over, as it were, when his wife came home one day from coffee with her friends starry eyed and distracted, lost in what Jeffrey recognized as one of her romantic reveries.

“What are you thinking about?” He asked. He still found his wife of seven years fascinating, and he longed to share in whatever event had triggered her romantic soul.

“Oh, nothing,” Mary said, plucking idly at the string of pearls around her neck, a smile playing at the corners of her lips. Jeffrey, who had prepared dinner for them both— beef and broccoli in oyster sauce— he prided himself on being a modern man— dished the steaming food from the wok onto plates he’d warmed in the oven and carried them to the dining room table.

“Come on,” Jeffrey said as he and his wife sat. “Did you see someone buying flowers? A young couple holding hands?” His wife was charmed by such things, and they often touched her heart and left her in just this state.

Normally, Mary shared her experiences with Jeffrey. But this time, his persistence caused her eyes to grow cold and the smile to vanish from her face. It was as if she’d

donned a suit of armor, all her emotions carefully hidden behind a skin of cold steel. “It was nothing,” she said. She carefully skewered a strip of beef and a broccoli floret and chewed them. “This is so good. Is it a new recipe?”

Jeffrey sensed that she was changing the subject. Her suddenly secretive demeanor disturbed him. He allowed her to steer the conversation away from her romantic mood on returning home, only to bring it up again as they cleared the table, and then again as they watched *The Daily Show*, as they used to before bed.

Each time, Mary deflected.

The more Mary deflected, the more Jeffrey grew desperate to know what had happened. His insecurities flared, and he felt affronted by his wife’s refusal to share her life with him in this one case. So, finally, after they had gotten into their pajamas and crawled into bed, Jeffrey told her just that. “I’m a little hurt,” he said. “That you won’t tell me what happened. You know how much I love it when you are in those rosy moods, and when you refuse to tell me it makes me feel— unloved.”

Mary sighed. “I think you will be upset.”

“Me? No. Why?” Now, Jeffrey simply had to know. “Tell me, so I can prove myself.”

“Promise?”

“Cross my heart.”

“It was— well, you know the Blaises?”

Jeffrey hid his disdain for them behind a smile. “Celia and Blaine? Lovely people.”

“Well, Celia came to coffee, and she was wearing— oh, it was the most beautiful diamond necklace. And, it turns out, it had once belonged to Elizabeth Taylor. Richard Burton had given it to her, and Blaine bought it for Celia for their anniversary because she’d seen it in a picture and had mentioned how much she loved it.”

Jeffrey smiled wider as his insides turned to acid. “Hmmm. That is very romantic. Good for them,” he said, patting his pillow three times. “See? Not upset at all.”

“That’s nice, dear,” Mary said, though she could plainly see Jeffrey was seething. She knew he felt he was not successful, and in particular that he had failed Mary, didn’t make enough money to provide her with the kind of life he was sure she wanted- fabulous vacations, three homes around the world.... And most of all a child. Ever since they’d discovered that he could not father children, his mania to give her bigger and better things had only gotten worse. She’d told him so many times that she was happy, that she loved him and their life, but he just couldn’t believe her.

Chapter Two

The next day, driven by his desperate need, Jeffrey overcame his hatred and jealousy of Blaine Blaise and did something he would have once thought impossible. He went to Blaine and asked for help. Blaine worked at the same law firm, where he’d been made the youngest partner in the history of the 100-year-old institution. He had a corner office with view of the Empire State Building, and when Jeffrey walked into the office, Blaine popped up from behind his mahogany desk and came around to shake Jeffrey’s hand. “Good to see you, bro,” Blaine said, giving Jeffrey’s hand a firm shake.

“You, too,” Jeffrey said. “Wow. What an office.”

“Yeah. I am one lucky man,” Blaine said, and the fact that he sounded like he really meant it only made Jeffrey hate him all the more.

Jeff started to move toward the chair in front of Blaine’s desk, but Blaine took his elbow and guided him toward the lounge area he’d set up to the side— all couches and stuffed leather chairs. “Here,” Blaine said. “What’s your poison?”

“Oh, I’m fine,” Jeff said.

“Scotch it is,” Blaine said, splashing scotch into a pair of rocks glasses. He carried them over, handing one to Jeff. “I heard only alcoholics drink alone,” Blaine said, the infernal and repugnantly friendly smile on his face. “So, you have to drink, or I’ll turn into one, right?”

Jeff chuckled, taking a sip of the scotch. “I can’t affirm the soundness of that argument, counselor. But this is good.”

“There he is,” Blaine said. “There’s the Jeff I remember. We should play golf one day, right?”

“As long as you don’t mind losing,” Jeff said, warming to the old boy, old chum small talk.

“Ha! Now, we really have to play,” Blaine said. He sipped his own scotch, sighed. “So, what can I do for you? My secretary said this was business.”

“Well, I didn’t want to just come right in and…”

“It’s fine. What’s up?”

“Well, I was hoping to pick your brain. You’re a rainmaker, and I need to start bringing in clients if I want to make partner. So, and maybe this is out of line, but what’s your secret?”

“The Morningstar Society,” Blaine said in flat, matter of fact voice.

Jeffrey sat back. “You mean, that’s real?”

Everyone who was anyone, or almost someone, had heard at least rumors of the Morningstars. It was said to be a secret society made up of the wealthy, the influencers, the people that mattered. Bill Gates. Stephen Spielberg. Warren Buffet. There were other rumors, suggestions of black magic, untold rituals, even human sacrifice.

Blaine leaned forward, his face now growing dark, his tone serious. “It’s very real,” Blaine said. “And before you even ask— yes. I can get you an invitation.”

Jeffrey stared. He felt like the room had grown darker. Then he laughed. “You almost had me there.”

“I am not joking,” Blaine said. “I am serious. Deadly serious.”

“Just like that? An invitation?”

“Not to join,” Blaine said. “I don’t have that power. But, on October 31st we hold our annual Devil’s Ball. It’s a masquerade. Potential members are invited to— audition. You would have a chance, Jeffrey. Or, I wouldn’t even offer.”

“Audition?”

“The terms will be made clear in the invitation. Yes or no?”

Jeffrey’s instincts were screaming no, but, he looked around the office, he thought about his wife, and he nodded. “Hell, yes,” he said.

“Good man,” Blaine said standing, shaking Jeffrey’s hand. “Remember this, my friend. Nothing great comes to any of us without sacrifice.”

“Of course,” Jeffrey said.

“And you must tell no one about this. The world believe the Morning Star Society is a myth, and we will do whatever it takes to keep it that way.”

“My lips are sealed.”

“They better be.”

Chapter Three

Two days later, a blood red envelope with gold letter was hand delivered to Jeffrey in his office. His heart raced. He knew this was the invitation, that everything Blaine had said was real, and that this was his chance to finally make it in the world. Using a letter opener, he sliced open the top of the envelope and dropped the invitation card into his hand. The card was black, and gold filigree letters shone in the office light as Jeffrey read.

Jeffrey Sonnet

Your presence is requested at the annual All Hallows Masquerade.

The competitors in your group are asked to cross dress.

The most convincing wins.

Your spouse should also cross-dress.

A driver will pick you up at precisely 9:30PM.

Do NOT be late.

.

Cross dress? What? Jeffrey shook his head. This had to be some sort of prank. A way for Blaine to make a fool of him. His anger grew. His fury. How dare that arrogant ass try and make a fool of him!?

“This is no prank,” he heard a voice whisper from behind him.

Jeff spun. There was no one there.

“This is your one chance,” the voice hissed again. Richard spun to once more see nothing, no one.

He turned, slowly, scanning the room. “There’s a hidden speaker somewhere, right? Who is that?”

“Technology makes this so much harder,” the voice said, annoyed. “No one believes I’m a spirit. Open your shirt.”

“Enough of this—” Jeffrey started to say, but then he felt something, and looking down he saw something moving inside his shirt, pushing, wagging across the fabric, making it wet. It looked almost like an eel. “Fuck,” Jeff said, yanking his shirt open, only to stare in horror as he saw— a mouth lined with razor sharp teeth gaping in the middle of his chest. Razor sharp rows of teeth lined the bloody lips, and a fat red tongue lolled out obscenely. “This is very real!” The mouth screamed. And Jeffrey’s world went black.

Jeffrey woke with a shout, almost tumbling out of his desk chair. Jane, the administrative assistant he shared with three other non-partners, stared. “Is everything okay?”

Jeff put a hand to his chest, where the mouth had been, but felt only flesh. He looked around, bewildered and terrified, but quickly masked his unease beneath a lawyerly mask of confidence. “Fine. Wow. I must have dozed off. Hey, don’t tell the boss?”

“Mum’s the word,” Jane said, dropping a file on his desk. “I wish I could promise this will keep you awake.” She turned and left, giving Jeff a nice view of her backside in her tight little skirt. He figured she was a lot of fun in bed. *If only I weren’t married...*

Just as he was thinking the whole thing had been a dream, he saw the blood red envelope, the black invitation on his desk, gold letters sparkling.

“It was real...” THE voice said. Jeff put his hand to his chest with a start, but there was nothing there.

Chapter 5

“Don’t do it,” Mary said, holding the invitation with two fingers, away from her body as if it were a dead rat. “This is a bad idea.”

“A lot of very important people will be there,” Jeff said. He was not allowed to explain the Morningstar Society to her, of course, but he did want to impress on her the importance of the party.

“All the more reason not to go,” she said, tossing the card onto the coffee table. “I really don’t think people seeing you in a skirt is going to do much for your reputation. Not that you don’t have a pair of really sexy legs, honey.”

“Yeah, well, Blaine Blaise went out on a limb to get me invited. I don’t what to tell him.” Jeff was sitting in his recliner, sipping a glass of bourbon.

“Tell him your wife refuses to wear a suit,” Mary said, walking over and leaning down to give him a kiss. “Blame it on me. He’ll understand.”

“That might put you on the outs with the Blaises,” Jeff said.

“Better than having the sight of you wearing heels burned into my brain.”

“You’re right,” Jeff said. In truth, he was glad his wife had refused and given him an out. The thought of cross-dressing disturbed him, and the thought of doing so in public was positively terrifying.

He went to see Blaine the next day to deliver the news, putting on an air of awe shucks dejection. Blaine had his putter out, idly tapping a golf ball into an electronic catch that popped it back to him. “That’s not good,” Blaine said, not pausing in his putting. “You sure you want to shit can your future, buddy?”

“Shit can?”

“The Morningstar Society will take this as an affront. An insult. An act of pure arrogance. Those same people who could make you a millionaire, will see to it you end up a low rent ambulance chaser.”

“Me? It’s my wife. She won’t do it.”

“What makes you think you can handle a billion-dollar account if you can’t even handle your wife?”

Jeff didn’t have an answer, only the sinking feeling that he was in deep, and there was no way out.

“If you care about your career, you’ll show up at the party. And you’ll win,” Blaine said. “But, hey, you do you.”

“Fuck,” Jeff said. “I don’t know anything about crossdressing.”

“I may be able to help you with that.”

Chapter 6

Later that afternoon, Jeff found himself standing at the entrance to 666 Madison Avenue, thinking, *seriously?* The building was shabby, just another white stone building gone grey from years of exhaust, a rusting water tank perched on the roof. Dingy lobby. Rickety elevator. There was nothing to inspire confidence in this— he pulled the card from his pocket and looked again- Leslie Vibe. He got off on the 13th floor, walked down the narrow hall, and came to the last door: also #13. He knocked. The door opened and a slender young man used him into a stunningly luxurious waiting room with marble floors, towering plants and a waterfall. “I’m Jean Vaugh. Ze Vibe will be with you shortly—“ Jean said, but before he could even finish, he was cut off by a booming bass voice shouting, “Darling! Doll! So good to meet you!

Leslie Vibe stood well over six feet tall and looked to weigh over 300 pounds. He grabbed Jeff’s hand with both of his, smothering it in a firm, friendly handshake. “I’m Jeffrey...”

“Sonnet, yes,” Vibe said, putting an arm around Jeffrey’s shoulders and guiding him into another room. “Stand still,” Vibe said, grabbing a camera and snapping pictures in a frenzy, circling Jeff, getting low, getting high. While Vibe snapped, Jean brought out a tape measure and took down Jeff’s measurements.

Jeff felt like he’d been caught up in a swirling tornado, and just when he was feeling totally overwhelmed Vibe and his assistant both took positions in front of him, chins in hands, and began to look over him intently.

“Not bad,” Jean said.

“Not good,” Vibe added. “Not bad, but not good.”

“Exquisite cheekbones,” Jean noted. “Feminine chin.”

“Hey—“ Jeff interjected.

“We’ll have to do something about those lips.”

“And the body needs a lot of work. Oh, dear.”

“Do you mind? I’m standing right here,” Jeff said.

Vibe and Jean laughed.

Jeff, as a lawyer, was used to taking command of situations. He cleared his throat meaning to use his authoritarian voice to set some boundaries. But, before he could, Vibe threw his hands in the air and said, “Omigod! I am going to make your beautiful.” With that, he once more threw an arm over Jeff’s shoulder and swept him right into a salon chair in a corner of the room that looked just like a beauty parlor. Jeff caught a glimpse of his shocked face in the mirror before Vibe spun the chair around so Jeff could no longer see himself.

Jean handed Jeff what looked like a glass of water with cucumber in it and tilting Jeff’s hand toward his mouth, said, “drink, doll. Drink up.” Jeff took a small sip.

“All of it,” Vibe said, rattling around in the counter drawers. “It’s for your skin. For you to have any chance to win this contest, you need to do something about that skin, baby.”

Talk of winning the contest reminded Jeff of why he’d come, and he tossed back the rest of the water in one gulp. “Someone’s thirsty!” Jean said, taking the glass. He then punched something on his phone, and the room filled with the sound of waterfalls and women chanting in some foreign language.

“What language is that?” Jeff asked, pulling his face away as Vibe came at him with a pair of tweezers, which Jeff recognized from watching his wife pluck her eyebrows. “You’re not going to touch my eyebrows,” he said. “I have to work.”

“Relax, doll,” Vibe said. “Sit back and relax.”

Jeff found himself growing calm, relaxing.

“That’s it. Trust me. Che Vibe is going here to help you.”

“I trust you,” Jeff mumbled as a haze seemed to settle over him. He sat back and sighed. By the time he realized Jean had used to restraints to tie his arms to the chair, it was too late. He struggled. “What is this?”

“Precaution,” Vibe said with a big smile, as Jeff felt something go around his forehead and pin his head in place. “Now, let’s give you some pretty eyebrows.”

“No,” Jeff mumbled. “Stop.”

“Now, now. Che Vibe knows best.”

“Ouch!” Jeff gasped as Vibe began to pluck. “That hurts.”

“Let’s do something about that voice,” Vibe said as he worked.

“Whhhh— mmmppfff!” Jean slipped a gas mask over Jeff’s mouth and nose. He saw the tube leading to the gas mask was filled with some sort of cloudy pink gas. It smelled like bubble gum and tasted like sugar. He struggled not to breathe, but eventually had no choice, and he could almost feel his vocal chords growing tighter and tighter. “Stop! No!” He cried out, and with each word his voice seemed to rise half an octave, so that when he asked, “What are you doing to me?” He sounded to himself like a teen-age girl.

The sound of that voice sickened and horrified him. He struggled weakly against his bonds. Jean began to apply fingernail extensions to his hands, as Vibe mercilessly tore out his eyebrows. “Yes, yes,” Vibe said. “You will thank us later.”

“The party is a month away,” Jeff said.

“So little time, but we’ll get you there,” Vibe said.

“Stop! I want out!” Jeff squealed, sounding like a frightened little girl.

“Let it all out,” Vibe said. “This is good. It’s all part of the process.”

Vibe finished with Jeff’s eyebrows, and then he held up long, thick false eyelashes for Jeff to see. “I’m going to use a permanent glue,” he said. “I mean, what you have just ain’t gonna cut it.”

“Permanent? What the fuck are you doing to me?”

“Making you sexy,” Jean said, admiring Jeff’s talons.

Jeff tried to hold his eyes wide open, but Vibe used a thumb to pull the lid down, and Jeff felt the lash being applied, first to the right eye, then the left. When Vibe finished, he blinked. He could see the lashes all around the periphery of his vision.

“Jean?” Vibe said, stepping back to admire his handy work.

“So much better,” Jean said. “I mean— night and day.”

“More like Doris Day!” Vibe said, and they both laughed. “Time to give this poor girl some lips.”

“I’ve seen thicker lips on a skull,” Jean said derisively. He removed the gas mask from Jeff’s face.

“Okay,” Jeff said, wincing at the feminine sound of his voice. “Let’s pause and— aaahhhhh!” He screamed as Vibe stabbed a needle into his lower lip, and before Jeff could catch his breath, he did the same to the upper lip. “Shit!”

“No, darling, collagen,” Vibe said. “And, yes. Omigod.”

“She looks like she could suck the chrome right off a firehouse,” Jean said. “I’m getting horny just looking at those babies.”

“Would you stop talking about me like that?” Jeff said, smacking his lips, unnerved both by what they were saying and the fact that his lips felt swollen, like he’d been punched in the mouth.

Both Vibe and Jean chuckled. “You’re gonna have to get used to it honey,” Vibe said. “Fetch me my wigs.”

“I told you,” Jeff said, trying to put some authority into his squeaky little voice. “The party isn’t for a month.”

Jean came back carrying four wigs— blonde, red, brunette and raven. All were long, thick with luxurious curls and waves. “I don’t see her as a blonde,” Vibe said, picking up a pair of electric clippers and turning them on, the buzzing sound filling the room.

“With her complexion and those green eyes, red would be so hot,” Jean said.

“I don’t want anyone of them,” Jeff said.

“Who cares what you want?” Jean said with a snort.

“What are you doing with the clippers?” Jeff asked, trying to fit together what was about to happen.

“Shaving your head,” Vibe said, plunging the clippers into Jeff’s mousy brown hair and cutting swath out, the hair tumbling onto Jeff’s lap. “You know, so we can glue the wig on good and tight!”

Jeff was finding himself growing more and more woozy, his energy seeming to drain out of him. “Stop,” he said weakly. “I didn’t come here for For... this...”

“Yeesh, maybe she is a blonde,” Jean said, examining the platinum blonde wig.

“I’m just glad the drugs are kicking in,” Vibe said. “All that shrieking was starting to get on my nerves.”

“Oh, you love it, when they scream,” Jean said.

Vibe giggled. “True!”

Jeff’s body turned into a wet noodle. He couldn’t control it, so when Jean removed the head restraint, he was only able to sit passively as he felt warm glue being spread over his scalp. Vibe carefully fitted the red wig to his head, a long strand falling over his left eye. “Oh, yes!” Jean said. “She’s gonna be a heartbreaker.”

Vibe used a bobby pin to fix Jeff’s hair, so that Jean could go to work on his face, attacking him with an arsenal of eyeliner, eyeshadow, blush and lipstick. Jeff whispered an occasionally, “why” or “please” but he couldn’t work up a rage, couldn’t struggle. It was the drugs, and it was shock at what was being done to him. When Jean finished with his makeover, he smacked his lips, feeling the tacky lipstick, and fluttered his eyes, annoyed at the way he couldn’t stop seeing those damn lashes. He felt sharp pain in his ears and didn’t even have to look to know that Vibe had pierced his ears and was now fitting him with earrings. *I’ll take them out*, he told himself. *Clean off this make-up. Get the wig cut. Mary would never need to see this. To see my shame.* He didn’t

even want to think about his voice, but what had been done could be undone. Somehow. He couldn't believe he'd come here, that he'd set himself up for this.

Vibe and Jean stood back, admiring their work, nodding. *It's over*, Jeff thought. *Thank God it's over*. "Can I go now?" He asked.

"We have to do your body still," Vibe said. "Get her breasts."

"Breasts?" Jeff gasped, finding the energy to shout.

"Better make them D cups," Vibe said.

"My pleasure," Jean said.

"Okay. This is too much," Jeff said, struggling again,

Vibe unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it open, then covered his chest in warm shaving cream.

Jean came in holding a pair of big, realistic looking great forms, with fat, pink nipples. "Happy Birthday to you!"

Vibe started to shave Jeff's chest, dragging the cold razor against his skin in loving strokes.

"I'm begging you," Jeff said, staring at the breasts in horror. "Please."

"You'll thank me one day," Vibe said, using a towel to clean the excess shaving cream off Jeff's chest.

"I'm very certain that I won't."

Vibe spread warm glue across Jeff's chest.

"I have a wife," Jeff said. "I can't have her see me with tits. Don't do this. I'll sue! I'll report you!"

"Good luck with that," Vibe said, stepping back. "Blaine Blaise is my attorney. Jean? I think this young lady is old enough to get her boobies!"

"You asshole! Stay away from me!" Jeff screamed.

Jean smiled as he walked up, pressing one of the breasts to Jeff's chest, holding it there, and then the other. As soon as Jean let go of the forms, Jeff felt their weight

tugging at his collar bone, felt his own flesh moving as the breasts swayed. “God-damn it,” he said, looking down, horrified. “I’ll cut them off. You can’t make me wear them.”

Vibe lifted one, let it drop and bounce.

“Stop!” Jeff said, unnerved by the feeling.

“Just keep in mind that we could always give you implants.”

Vibe put some flesh tone makeup along the seams of Jeff’s new assets, then buttoned his shirt as far as it would go, which left a nice round valley of cleavage popping out the top of shirt. He mussed Jeff’s hair and then turned to Jean. “Shall we let her see herself?”

“We must.”

Vibe spun Jeff’s chair around, and his cherry red, pillowy lips dropped open in shock as he stared at- “Holy shit,” he said. A gorgeous woman stared back at him, her big, green eyes wide with shock. He could see himself in her, but everything had softened, turned from a face that edged toward the rugged toward one that resided on the softer, feminine side of the scale. “How?”

“Oh, just a few tricks I picked up over the years,” Vibe said. “My, my.” He grabbed his camera and snapped a few pics. Jeff couldn’t stop staring at himself—his lips were so fat and inviting, and the lipstick had a little shine to it, making them seem so wet and... kissable...

“Let’s get her up,” Vibe said. Jeff was in a total fog now, his mind gone all fuzzy from the drugs and the shock of seeing himself so— sexy. Jean undid his restraints, and he tried to stand, but he’d been sitting so long his legs had gone to sleep, and with the drugs he stumbled and fell against Jean, who held him up, leading him to another large room stuffed with racks of women’s clothes.

They got him out of his clothes and started to dress him, getting him into some kind of padded girdle, crushing his waist inside a waist cinch, putting him in tights and

then a skirt. Instead of raging and demanding, Jeff just found himself laughing at the absurdity of it all. “Yeah,” he mumbled. “Sure. Let’s put me in a skirt....” Or, “great. High heels. I *never* saw that coming... NOT.” Finally, the bra—lace cups and slender shoulder straps with little bows... For some reason the bra shocked him out of his stupor, and he backed away, wobbling on his heels, feeling terrified at the thought of wearing a bra. “No. No. No!”

“Honey, you have D cups. You need this,” Vibe said, advancing toward, bat in hands like it was a straight jacker.

Jeff crossed his arms over his breasts, his long red nails bright against the pale skin of his arms. Vibe and Jean started talking to him in soothing voices. He wasn’t even sure what they said, but he found himself standing bashfully in his first bra. The sensation was different—the feeling of the strap across his back, the shoulder straps tight against his skin, the way the bra lifted and presented his breasts to the world, like they’d become his own personal Simba.

Somehow, later, he found himself with a purse slung over his shoulder, walking, turning, walking, as Vibe took him through “Heels 101” so, as Vibe put it, “You don’t fall down and bruise that pretty face.”

The padded girdle had given Jeff the illusion and hips and a big, plump rump. With all that new back plus the weight and mass of his new chest, his whole body felt awkward and too much and unbalanced and FAT. He felt fat with all this extra padding, and the way it swayed and bounced and made him wiggle his hips as he walked, heel to toe... hell to toe... er, heel to toe...turn... “Good,” Vibe said. “Good for today.” He walked over from the throne like chair he’d been sitting in and took Jeff’s hand.

“Her’s what you need to know, doll,” Vibe said. “To win this masquerade, you need to be the best of the best. You need to be the most convincing woman in the room.”

“It’s a month away,” Jeff said.

“And that’s why you need to take a crash course in femininity,” Vibe said, now walking Jeff toward a mirrored wall. Jeff’s heart began to race. They had not allowed him to see himself since he’d seen his face. “Some of the others— yes— they will just throw something together, or maybe even hire someone the day of the party for a makeover, and they will indicate all night long *I’m just fucking around... I’m such a macho man...* And they will play over the top femininity as a way to mock and demean women. They have no chance. Most men are too insecure to explore their feminine side. We all have one,” Vibe continued. “Carl Jung called it the animus and the anima, the male and female.”

Jeff could now see himself in the mirror, and just as with face, he was shocked to see a woman in the mirror holding Vibe’s hand. She had a bombshell body, and propped up on heels and encased in those black tight, her legs looked— sexy? Once more, his mind reeled. It didn’t seem possible, and the sight of himself like this terrified him, made him want to get an ax, chop some wood, smoke a cigar, ride a Harley...

“Fight of flight,” Vibe said. “I know your male weakness wants to run right now, but what you need is not fear; you need courage. You need the courage to allow yourself to be this, see this, and for the next month live as a woman.”

“What?” Jeff said.

“Wealth. Power. Success. It can all be yours... but at a price.”

Chapter Seven

Mary sat on the couch with a glass of wine. There was something on TV, but she wasn’t really watching it. Jeff had said he was going to be staying late at the office, but there had been something in his voice; she was sure he’d been lying. Then, it was

seven, eight, nine... and.., she'd worried, and then gotten angry, sure that he had some slut on the side... and then worried, and then furious... she called his cell, texted.... Nothing.... Now she seethed, feeling guilty for not trusting him while also preparing to DESTROY THE CHEATING BASTARD...

She heard the key in the door. The luck turning over. She got up, trying to hide her feelings, determined to get it out of him one way or another, but she KNEW he had not been at the office.

The door swung open, and a gorgeous red head appeared, slipping the keys back into her purse. "Who the hell are you?" Mary yelled, thinking Jeff had actually given his mistress the keys to their apartment. "You slut. Who the hell do you think you are walking into my home?"

"Mary?" The woman said in a Barbie doll voice. "It's me. Jeff."

Mary looked at the woman's huge breasts. Her tiny waist. Her plump lips. "What the fuck are you talking about."

Jeff was dying with shame. To have his wife see him like this, in a skirt, with a purse, let alone breasts and heels.... But he convinced her it was him, and then she blew up all over again. "We agreed you would not do this!" Mary snapped.

"I know," Jeff said. The sound of that little girl voice grated on Mary's ears. "I shouldn't have gone there... obviously..."

"And you have tits now? And you're walking around in public like that? You make me sick."

"I'm sorry," Jeff said.

"You should be."

The news that Jeff would be living as a woman for the next month did not go over well. Seeing her husband looking— gorgeous— hearing him talk in that female voice— the fact that he had done this behind her back—was he even wearing a bra now? It all enraged and disgusted her... but there was nothing for it now. He'd

seemingly bought into this idea that he needed to do this to win the Halloween Party, thought she was starting to wonder if that was all just something that had always been there...

In any case, she decided to make him pay, and it started the next morning when she did his makeup. "I know you want to be a pretty girl now," she said, her voice full of acid. "So, let's pencil in those slender eyebrows of yours..."

"I don't want to be a pretty girl..."

"I don't want to be a pretty girl..." Mary mimicked his high-pitched voice. "You do. Admit it. You've probably been putting on my bras and panties whenever I wasn't home, prancing around in my heels..."

"I never did..."

"You never were much of a man. Hopefully, you can do better as a woman."

Jeff stopped arguing. He understood why she was angry.

His co-workers had been prepared for Jeff to arrive en femme. A memo had gone out, but no one expected him to look so hot. As he walked through the office, feeling so self-conscious it made him want to die, he could feel eyes on him, hear people whispering. He felt super embarrassed at the huge breasts, his big, plump rear. He heard "so pretty". And "gorgeous" and it was terrible to have people talk about him like that, to see him dressed as a woman, and yet he just kept thinking about the rewards.

At one point he was at his desk, brushing a strand of hair away from his face for what seemed like the ten thousandth time, when Jane came in, giving him a once over, then letting her eyes settle on his face. "Miss Sonnet?"

Miss. The word grated on Jeff. But he'd agreed he needed to live as a woman. For a whole month. He'd tried to talk as little as possible all day. He hated the sound of his voice. "Yes?"

He saw what he thought was mild amusement in Jane's eyes, but he couldn't be sure. "I just wanted to say I think what you are doing is so brave."

"Thanks," Jeff said. "I appreciate that." The cover story was that Jeff had taken on a case arguing that dress codes with differing standards for men and women were inherently sexist, and Jeff had decided to adhere to the office dress code for women as a form of research. No one totally bought it, but it was enough to at least seem possible.

"And, also, I hope this isn't out of line, but you are stunning. So pretty. I can't even believe that's you."

Jeff, realizing that he'd been slouching due to the new weight on his chest, straightened his back, which caused him to thrust his breasts forward. "Well, thank you so much," he said, biting back the urge to tell her to stop treating him like a woman. In fact, that was the whole point of this: being treated and learning to act like a woman, so instead he said, "I love those shoes."

"Oh! Thanks!"

My first feminine moment, Jeff said to himself. Hooray for me.

The next month seemed like a nightmare. Mary mocked and ridiculed Jeff every night. When he undressed and she saw the welt on his shoulders from his bra straps, she laughed, she called him Sugar Tits and made comments about his how he was walking like a bimbo. She mercilessly gave him hell for wearing panties. He just endured it all. Once this was all over and he got back to being a man, he was sure she would forgive him, especially once he made partner, with all the wealth and prestige that would bring them.

At work, he endured the looks, the comments. He now ate lunch with a group of the women attorneys—he wasn't welcome among the men and felt uncomfortable around them anyway. The women engaged in some good natured teasing about how did he like having to wear heels all day and that sort of thing, but mostly they just

seemed amazed a man would want to trade in his privilege for a life in skirts— even for a month. Jeff took the time to study the way they moved, talked, walked... Now that he'd gone this far, he felt he only had one choice: to go all in and win.

Each night when he got home from work, he kicked off his heels and massaged his feet and calves. He couldn't wait to get out of his bra, sighing with relief, running the welts in his shoulders left by the bra straps. Despite his wife's carping and mockery, he even found himself taking long, luxurious baths, trying to relax and decompress, letting the warm water ease what had become aching back pain from the strain of his large, heavy breasts. He couldn't talk to Mary about any of it. If he tried to complain about his bras or the pain from wearing heels all day, she bitterly reminded him that it was all his own fault. "I really don't have time to hear my HUSBAND complain about wearing heels all day," she'd say, refusing to even look at him.

Chapter 8

The day of the party came. Though Jeff had been learning to do his own makeup, much to Mary's annoyance, he went back to Vibe's salon to get a professional makeover. He walked in, purse over his shoulder, hands out to his sides, and Jean and Vibe watched him walk in, impressed by his feminine gait, his mannerisms. "You've come so far," Vibe said, clapping.

"You are so feminine," Jean said. "You've worked so hard." He actually gave Jeff a quick hug, and they air kissed.

A man walked into the room. He was short, but handsome in a striped, three-piece suit, fashion stubble on his face. He looked Jeff up and down, whistled. "You are one hot tomato," he said.

Jeff hid his irritation. He'd gotten used to being checked out by men, and the most shocking thing was not the comment, as Jeff had also gotten used to guys hitting

on him, but the old-fashioned dorkiness of it. Still, he knew he was expected to be sweet and compliant as a woman, so smiled brightly and hooked his hair behind his ear. “Thanks.” His voice was full of giggle.

“You don’t recognize me?” The guy said, and then Jeff realized it was Mary.

“Mary?” He said, shocked.

“I decided to have a little fun myself,” Mary said. “I’m coming to the party as your husband, sugar tits.”

Mary waited while Jeff got his makeover. Vibe had selected a black dress with long sleeves— he still needed to hide his arms— and a plunging neckline the celebrated his epic cleavage, though they were covered with a thin, transparent lace to hide the seams of his breast forms. Stiletto heels. Dangling, sparkling, chandelier earrings. He looked like a movie star, and as he examined himself in the mirror, one hadn’t on a hip, the other at his cheek, he felt sexy, confident. There was no way he wouldn’t win, he felt. He worked so hard. Sacrificed so much. He’d made himself a woman, and it would make all his dreams come true.

They took a limo to a mansion in the Connecticut countryside. Mary came out and opened his door for him, then put a hand on the small of his back as they walked into the mansion. She seemed to really be loving her role as the man. As they entered the party, they were handed domino masks to hold in front of their faces, and they started to make the rounds. Mary shook hands with the men, while Jeff was given hugs and air kisses. He found himself with a group of wives, talking about their husbands, their kids, their favorite spas and all the problems of being wives, while Mary was laughing and boasting with a group of men. The party went on, and they mingled, came together, separated and mingled some more.

Jeff eyed the other men— his competitors. Vibe had been right. Most of them had looked it as an opportunity to clown, over doing their makeup, talking in their male voices or doing mock falsettos, making fun of women and girl talk. Some had

worn flats, but the ones who dared heels wobbled and walked with gross, male walks, clearly having not practiced at all. Jeff snorted and he moved gracefully across the floor in his heels. He was better in heels than some of the women, he decided, who could use some lessons.

Midnight arrived. The group gathered in the foyer, and a man wearing a goat head stood at the top of the stairs. Mary found Jeff, slipping her arm around his waist. “How you doing, babe?” She asked, using her male voice.

“I’m good,” he answered, though he was trembling. This was the moment of truth. They were all about to find out who had been selected to join the Morningstar Society. To Jeff, this was all or nothing. He didn’t think he could ever return to his firm now if he lost. He would never be looked at the same way, so the only chance he had was to win.

The goat headed man made some speech. Jeff didn’t hear a word the man was saying. He was thinking about the last month: his makeover, getting used to having breasts, the infernal waist trainer.... This was the end of all that, at least. And then he would have to try and win back Mary, to become a man again in her eyes. He would not miss being a woman. It was too much work, and he had had never realized how much pain was involved in a woman’s life— at least one built like him.

“And so, I would like to introduce the newest member of the Morningstar Society, Mrs. Angelique Sonnet.”

Jeff felt like he’d been punched in the stomach. His head grew light, and he fell against Mary. Nothing. It had all been for nothing.

“You won,” Mary said. “You won.”

“What?” Jeff said, confused as a pair of men wearing stags’ heads approached carrying huge bouquet of flowers. They pushed the flowers into his arms and led him toward the stairs. He glanced back at Mary. “What’s happening?”

“Go,” Mary said. “Go.”

They led Jeff up the stairs and to the man in the goat mask. Jeff stood there, terrified, trembling, confused. “Angelique,” the man said. “Welcome.”

He leaned down and kissed Jeff on the mouth. Jeff fainted, and the man caught him, while the crowd cheered and clapped.

Chapter Nine

The rest of the night was a blur. Jeff recovered from his fainting spell. He had vague memories of being promenaded around, congratulated. A blur of smiling faces, and then they were back in the limo, and then back at home. Jeff couldn't wait to get out of his dress, to get rid of the breast form, the waist cinch. “Can you unzip me?” He asked, looking back over his shoulder at Mary, who was sitting on the bed, legs spread.

“Sure thing, babe,” she said.

“Why are you still talking in that voice?” Jeff asked.

Mary just grunted. She unzipped his dress. Jeff let it fall to his feet, and then stepped out of it. He reached back and unhooked his bra and tossed it to the ground as well. “That's the last time—“ he started to say, but something was wrong. He felt his breasts sway and bounce. He felt his nipples getting hard in the cold air. He felt them like they were—real. “What?” He looked down, cupped his breasts, and he felt his cold hands against his soft, heavy breasts...

Mary watched, a little smile on her face. “What the hell is going on?” Jeff said, running to the bathroom, looking at his chest. He couldn't see the lines where the breast forms ended. The breasts looked real, but that wasn't possible. He grabbed and pulled on the soft flesh, and he felt them, felt himself pulling, yanking. It hurt. They were so sensitive.

Mary's face appeared in the mirror behind him. She had an arrogant, superior smirk on her face.

"Oh, shit," Jeff said, a terrifying thought occurred to him. He reached down and pushed a hand under the waist band of his panties. He felt— a flat space, stiff hair. "Oh, God. No." He whispered. Closing his eyes, he slipped a finger between the lips of his vagina, screaming, yanking his hand out... "Fuck! Fuck! What the hell happened to me?"

"I don't see anything wrong," Mary said. "You look like a hot ass woman to me."

Jeff turned, covering his breasts with his hands. He looked at Mary and noticed a tent in her pants. The sight woke some strange new needs and thoughts in him, needs that terrified him. He backed away. He was panting now, terrified. "This is a dream," he said. "A nightmare."

"Let's go with dream," Mary said, stepping forward, cupping Jeff's cheek, kissing him. "Come to bed," she said, her voice husky. "Let me introduce you to the joys of being a woman."

"No. Please," Jeff said.

But when she took her hand and led him to their bed, he meekly followed, and she lay him down, and she made love to him as a man, staring into his eyes as he stared at her, terrified, hair all in his face as she took him.

Chapter Nine

Angelique didn't hate her life. She didn't love it, either: She endured it. She was in bed, sleeping, when she heard the baby cry. Sighing, she got up and went to the crib, pulling down her nighty and cradling her baby, she lifted it to his breast. The baby found her nipple and started to suck. She glanced at Mary, soundly sleeping and struggled against her feelings of resentment toward him. But then he took the baby to

the living room and sat, gently rocking him as he fed. Blaine had explained that the firm needed diversity, so it had been necessary for Jeff to become a woman so he could replace a retiring partner. “You get it,” Blaine had explained. They’d finally gone golfing. Angelique at the woman’s tee. “You aren’t going to be one of those hypersensitive broads always screaming “me, too.”

Angelique had giggled and said, “I hate those girls.”

Blaine had patted him on the ass. “Dude, I gotta say, you’re a hot piece of ass.”

“My *husband* keeps telling me,” Angelique said, wanting to signal that she wasn’t available and resisting the urge to punch Blaine in the face.

And now she was a working mother, and a wife, and a woman. Her breasts ached. They were heavy with milk. Her back ached. Her feet hurt. But, well, she was a woman now, and she just had to deal with it.

The End

Baby Daddy

“Don’t you want to stay the night?” Cheryl lay sprawled out on the bed, a shirt wrapped strategically around her sweat sheen body. Her cheeks and nose flush.

“I gotta get up early for work,” Andy mumbled as he pulled on his jeans.

“But what about all that stuff about a connection?” Cheryl asked. She sounded hurt but had a smirk on her face.

Everything about this woman weirded Andy out. She acted two ways all the time- interested and bored, cold and hot. He’d had no intention of staying from the minute they’d decided to hook up, but then the sex had been off, she had been strange, and he just needed to get the hell out of her weird ass apartment with all the satanic looking bullshit on the walls, the incense and the candles.

“I’ll call you,” Andy said, pulling on his shoes.

Cheryl laughed, a cold, laugh like daggers of ice.

Andy hated being called out on his bullshit. His temper flared. “If I say I’ll call you, I’ll call you.”

“You’re so sexy when you’re angry.”

“Okay. Fine.” Andy headed for the door.

“Be good, babe.”

Andy paused, hand on the doorknob. She’d been all giggly and flirty when they’d met at the bar, but as soon as they’d gotten to her apartment she’d talked down to him like he was the chick. He almost turned around to put her in her place, but no. No. He’d just be playing into her weird game, and besides— the sex had been so odd. He left without another word.

As soon as Andy left, Cheryl began laughing, and laughing and laughing as the spell she'd used to mask her true face melted away.

Chapter Two

Andy collapsed into bed, slept fitfully, his mind tormented. He woke feeling guilty, ashamed. As he got ready to work, images from the night before kept flitting through his mind, and he cringed remembering what she'd made him do. *Why did I go along with all that?* He brushed his teeth, gargled with Listerine, trying to get the taste of her out of his mouth.

He couldn't stop thinking about her. He'd be sitting in a meeting, tuning out the speaker, but instead of sports he'd think of her— those fierce green eyes, the way she smiled at him, like a shark about to feed.... It made him tremble, and he pushed the thought out of his mind...

But here she was again as he worked on a report, putting her hand to his chin, tilting his head back...

He looked at his phone, mouth dry. Maybe I should call her. Maybe we can hook up again? But the thought of hooking up with her didn't feel right, or good, or exciting.

It felt like sickness.

Chapter Three

"I don't know," Andy said, sitting on the edge of his bed, feeling humiliated. "Maybe I'm sick."

Alice was getting dressed, looking annoyed and disappointed. “It happens to all guys once and awhile,” she said, robotically. “Don’t worry about it.”

“It doesn’t happen to me,” Andy said.

“Maybe some other time,” Alice said. If Andy had any awareness, he would have heard it in her voice. She wondered if it was her, somehow, but he was too absorbed in his own failure to even think about her. He heard the door close.

In fact, Alice was gorgeous. Perfect skin. Bombshell body. Sweet and feminine as could be. And Andy was burning with passion, aching with a need for release.

But his guy just— sat there. Wouldn’t respond. He paced. Took a cold shower. He wouldn’t be able to sleep until he got rid of the pressure. He looked at the phone. Thought about Cheryl. A memory flashed through his mind— him on his hands and knees, Cheryl down on his arrogantly, strap on glistening on the darkness.

He felt himself getting hard.

Chapter Four

Weeks passed. Andy stopped dating after his second “failure to launch.” He stayed home, watched porn. He was trying to recalibrate his brain, because he found he could only get turned on now when he thought about Cheryl, and the way she’d... used... him.

Andy stood in front of the room, clicker in hand, working through his slide presentation. “So,” he said, -click- “as you can see, our fourth quarter

projections look...” He stopped as a wave of nausea swept over him, his gut clenched. He put a hand to his mouth and tried to steady himself.

“You okay?” Max, the manager for their division said.

“Yeah just...” And then Andy spun, just making it to the corner garbage can before he puked up his breakfast of eggs and sausage.

Andy was excused from the meeting. He went to the bathroom and washed his face, rinsed out his mouth. Great. Just great. That’s going to be the talk of the office for a week.

It was. Andy took the good-natured ribbing, joked about it. But, he was really not pleased being the “pukey guy.”

Chapter Five

Andy felt tired all the time, but he forced himself to put on his shoes and head out to the grocery store. He bought five packages of bologna and some Wonder Bread. He was just dying for some bologna sandwiches, which was totally weird because he never liked the stuff. Back home, he made the gross new food obsession— bologna on white bread, lots of mayonnaise— another thing he never liked, and then he curled up on the couch, gleefully munching, thinking he really needed to get his diet under control. He felt bloated and heavy and was suffering headaches. It had to be this gross food, and he was determined this was the last time.

He’d learned to anticipate his pukey moments, which seemed to come at random times. Morning, afternoon, night. But he didn’t embarrass himself too badly at work because he could sense them coming and make an escape to the bathroom, though more than once he wasn’t alone in there.

It was his boss, Max, who pushed him to finally see a doctor. Andy, like most men, had an aversion to doctors. But Max kept hearing about his being sick, and he gave Max a day off and insisted he get it looked into.

Max sat on the examination table in his underwear. The doctor checked his blood pressure, his reflexes. When he started to check Andy's lymph nodes, he put his hands on Andy's chest and pressed. Andy winced, gasped.

"Your chest sensitive?" The doctor asked, noticing that nipples were protruding slightly.

"A little," Andy said. "Any idea what's wrong with me?"

"Let's get your blood tests back and take it from there."

In fact, Andy's symptoms were very clear, but it never entered the doctor's mind to consider what he might be experiencing.

Chapter Six

Weeks later.

Andy had to buy new clothes. He'd developed a pot belly that hung out over his belt line. His face looked puffy, and he hated the sight of himself. But, he was so hungry. He couldn't stop eating, and his back and feet ached, and he was itchy. Constantly itchy. Standing in front of the mirror he looked in horror at the red welts—the stretch marks on his belly.

Around the office, he was no longer puke boy. People had started to call him Duck because of the way he waddled when he walked. Getting out of a chair was becoming a struggle, and he couldn't help but put his hands

on the small of his back when he was hanging around the break room. He couldn't see it, but one day he was standing there, hands on the small of his back, and Cassie, who was expecting, was standing there the exact same way. The women around the office started to joke about it.

And Cheryl. She haunted his thoughts, his dreams. He thought he saw her everywhere, longed for her smell, the sound of her voice.

The doctor said there was nothing wrong. But this had all started that night— that terrible night with *her*.

He finally picked up the phone and sent her a text. "I want to see you."

He put the phone down and waited for an answer.

Days passed. He texted her again and again, more and more frantically. No answer. No answer. Andy's head began to swirl, rage, regret, shame and fear. His emotions took over. He spent nights crying, eating bologna, chocolate then, suddenly, flying into fits of rage and then crying spells.

Chapter Seven

More weeks pass. Andy had to buy more clothes. He shops in the big and tall section, but nothing really fits. All his weight seems to be going to his belly and butt, so the clothes both hang and cling. His ankles have swollen. There is no sign of the lean athlete he once was, and he is disgusted, wants to just hide from the world, but he needs a job, so-

He's sitting in his office chair with his hands folded on his belly, talking to Marcia about a client, when he feels it: a punch, a thump from inside his body. Andy's mouth drops open, and he sits up, staring down at his belly.

"What is it? You okay?" Marcia says.

“Um, yeah,” Andy says, laughing. “A little” -- another thump. “Indigestion.”

He finishes the conversation with Marcia, though he is not present. He just robotically responds, because all he can think about is a terrible new thought— there is something inside him.

Andy fires off more angry, terrified texts to Cheryl. He makes an appointment and goes straight to the doctor after work. He is in tears. “There’s something in me,” he hisses. “There’s something growing inside me.”

The doctor is perplexed, but he is thinking about Andy’s symptoms now, beginning to contemplate the impossible. But no. That makes no sense. Andy is a man. He sees wet spots forming on Andy’s shirt. “Andy?” He says, gesturing.

Andy gasps and covers his puffy chest with both arms, blushing furiously. After some calming talk, he admits that his nipples have been leaking.

Andy is on the examination table on his back, as the doctor spreads some goop over his belly. Andy feels relieved and terrified. The doctor had believed him; there is something inside him. He imagines something like a lamprey, some parasite with razor teeth, some killing machine Cheryl has infected him with. He wants it out.

The doctor begins the sonogram, and Andy cranes his neck to see the screen, to see— “What is that?”

“Well,” the doctor says. “I would have thought this was impossible, but that’s a baby.”

Andy’s eyes go wide and he shakes his head. “A what? No.”

The nurse covers her mouth. Something about a man being pregnant amuses her, and the horrified look on his face only more so. She thinks what's she's feeling might be wrong, but she feels it anyway.

The doctor knows Andy is a man, or at least has a man's parts. But now his science is telling him Andy also a womb, ovaries. He is pregnant, and there is no other way to see it. "Mr. Baker, you are pregnant."

There are tears and denials. Andy doesn't want to believe this, can't believe this. He storms out of the office— or waddles, rather, and the staff watches him go. Word has already spread of the pregnant man, and they are wondering if this could maybe lead to them being on television.

Chapter Eight

"Cheryl!" Andy screams, pounding on her door. "Cheryl! I know you're in there!"

The door swings open, but it isn't Cheryl.

"Janice?" It's Andy's ex-wife.

"Hey, honey," she says, glancing down at his belly. "You are showing and popping!"

"What's going on? What the hell did you do to me?"

"Come in," Cheryl says. "Sit."

Andy comes in. He puts a hand to his belly. He feels the thumps, fast now, repeated, and he winces.

"Is she kicking?" Cheryl asks.

"No," Andy lies, though he is starting to wonder, starting to come to the point where he might consider believing.

“Sit,” Cheryl repeats. “Please. You need to take it easy in your delicate condition.”

Andy lowers himself into a chair. His back aches, and his feet are sore. Cheryl finds it comical watching her pregnant ex-husband struggling to sit, with his big, baby belly. His face is all puffy, and she can see he is developing breasts. Soon they will swell with mother’s milk. If we could ask Andy right now why he is sitting instead of screaming, he could not tell us. He waits, expecting an explanation.

Cheryl takes a sip of wine. “I would offer you some, but as an expectant mother...”

“Just cut the crap,” Andy finally snaps. “So, what, this is some kind of payback?”

“Yes,” Cheryl says. “For the way you treated me. The way you abandoned me.”

“Well, enough is enough. Okay? Just— undo whatever you did.”

Cheryl shakes her head. “Whatever I did? Andy, you must realize you’re pregnant, right?”

“That’s not possible,” Andy barks. “Men don’t get pregnant. Now, I am telling you to fix this or I will sue the hell out of you.”

Cheryl is surprised. She didn’t expect this. She thought at this point Andy would have come to terms with his condition, that he would have come to beg her to save him from motherhood— which she won’t. But his denial throws her off her game, and she finds herself concerned. “Andy, I need you to understand something. That night? The night we had sex?”

“Don’t remind me,” Andy says as the shameful memories flicker through his mind. He, on his hands and knees....

“I made you my woman,” Cheryl says. “It was a spell. I’m the father of your child, Andy. You’re carrying my baby. You’re going to be a mother.”

“This is bullshit.” Andy screams, struggling to get up out of the chair. “I’m not a woman. I’m not pregnant. You’re sick, Cheryl. I’m not a woman. I’m not.”

“Andy, you know there is a baby...”

He feels a thump

“inside...”

Another thump

“...you.”

Tears start to pour down Andy’s cheeks. He’s been emotional for the past few months, and the tears shame him, and he feels more of the baby’s kicks— no, the thumps- and he gets to his feet and waddles to the door.

Cheryl watches him, and she is confused and annoyed because she had imagined this moment for so long, how she would mock him, torment him, the pregnant man, and instead she feels— worried for him. Concerned. He is carrying her child, and she feels she needs to protect him, help him. Help their baby.

She wants him to have HER baby. She throws her glass against the wall, and it shatters into a thousand fragments.

Chapter Nine

Andy starts to wear layers of t-shirts. He tapes cotton bandages over his nipples. He can’t risk a leakage. He overhears a couple women joking, wondering when he’s due and it sickens him. He keeps forgetting things,

feels fuzzy-brained and distracted all the time. When he looks up his symptoms the computer tells him he'd suffering from Mommy Brain.

He feels the thing inside him wiggle or turn. It's terrifying to him, to know this thing is growing inside his body, and at the same time he is compulsively cleaning his apartment. He thinks it's to distract himself from Cheryl and what sick joke she has played on him, but he is actually nesting. He imagines a monster, a jellyfish, an alien.

Finally, Friday after a tough workday, he sits down at his computer, and he does a search for "stages of pregnancy." It's all there. Everything he has been experiencing.

As he reads, he senses the baby inside him, feels it and accepts it for the first time, and his cheeks flush as he remembers the image on the Sonogram, and a warmth fills his heart, and he is crying again as he falls in love with his baby.

Andy is back on the examination table, glowing as he looks at his baby on the screen. "We're going to need to do a c-section," the doctor is explaining. "You don't have a birth canal."

Andy nods. He trusts the doctor. Andy is scared and nervous and worried and he asks a lot of questions. The doctor has seen this before. It's common with new mothers, and he knows what Andy is really asking for is assurance.

It's humiliating, but Andy thinks only of his baby now. He needs to make sure his baby will be covered by his insurance plan, so he has no choice: he goes to HR and tells them that he is an expectant mother, and he asks them his questions and makes sure his baby will be protected.

When he leaves work to find television crews waiting for him, he fights off the urge to run and hide, and instead politely answers some questions,

making sure to mention that he is starting a GoFundMe page to help with childcare. The next day everyone at work is fascinated. They congratulate him, ask him his due date, and the women organize a baby shower. Andy registers and puts together his wish list— all the things he will need for the baby, and it's hard for him not to just go out and buy them, but he likes the idea of the whole community being involved. He read it takes a village to raise a child. When the day of the shower comes, Andy is no longer embarrassed, though he is so ready to get this baby out of him. In a room full of women, talking about pregnancy and motherhood, Andy realizes he is one of them now. Whatever other biology he has, he has a baby inside him, and that bonds him forever with the females.

Men just can't understand what they go through.

Chapter 10

Andy is sitting up in his hospital bed, cradling his baby as she suckles. He is smiling down at her- so little, so tiny. "You're so beautiful," he says. "Mommy loves you so much." The baby wiggles, and Andy is sure she knows what he is saying, how he feels. He has never loved anyone as much as he loves little Eislyn. "Little Eislyn, my pretty dream..." He sings softly...

"Andy." It's Cheryl. Standing in the doorway to his room. Andy tenses. Cheryl is dangerous. She scares him.

Andy pushes the call button, then holds Eislyn more tightly, protectively. "Get out," he says. "Get out of my room."

"I just want to see my daughter," Cheryl says. She has become obsessed with this child, and she wants to be part of her life.

“You have no right to be here.”

“I’m her father.”

“Try convincing a judge of that,” Andy spits.

“Andy, stop acting crazy...”

“I’m NOT CRAZY,” Andy hisses, worried he will scare his baby.

The nurse arrives. “Please get her out of here,” Andy says. “She’s upsetting me and the baby.”

“Miss?” The nurse says. She and the other nurses have rallied around Andy. They love that he has embraced motherhood, that he is so caring and attentive to his child. They wish more men would be like him and not just wait until their kids can throw a ball to show an interest. But, of course, he carried the child, so they know he has a special bond with his baby no other man will ever comprehend.

“I’m his ex-wife,” Cheryl says. “I just want to...”

“Do I need to call security?”

“Fine,” Cheryl spits, leaving, glancing back. She is consumed with jealousy for Andy, resentment, hate. As she leaves the hospital, she sees news crews out front. Andy has become famous and much loved. His YouFundMe page has raised over 200,000 dollars, all earmarked for Eisllyn’s education. Cheryl hates it. She hates it all.

As she walks down the cold, empty streets outside the hospital, she has never felt more bitter and sad and hopeless. She is only just beginning to realize that while she thought she was cursing Andy, she was actually cursing herself.

A flash. A cloud of smoke, and there stands Lucifer in female form, wearing tux, glass of Champagne in hand. She is gorgeous and dangerous, looking much the same as she did when Cheryl first met her at the

support group for divorced women. Of course, at first she just called herself Lucy.

“You!” Cheryl spits. “You screwed me! You tricked me!”

“Pardon?” Lucifer says, chuckling. “I came here to celebrate with you. I gave you everything you wished for. Your ex-husband, pregnant, and now a single mother, held up before the entire world to see.”

“He was supposed to be miserable. Humiliated. Instead, everyone loves him. They think he is some kind of saint because he’s a man and he had a baby. It’s not fair.”

“Oh, dear, you didn’t specify any of that “humiliated misery bit” in your wish. I agree it is so unfair. Once again, a man gets showered with praise for doing what women have been doing for millennia. So unfair.”

Cheryl is crying now, broken. None of this is how she imagined it. “I want another wish... “

“Sorry, luv. Just one wish, since you only have one soul.”

“I never thought I would feel so....”

“Small? Petty? Well, you know the old saying? Be careful what you wish for...”

The End

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