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Popped Culture

Popped Culture is Teace Snyder's fourth novel and third publication.

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Also by Teace Snyder,

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Popped Culture

a novel

Teace Snyder

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Chapter...

“Why?”

“Because.”

“I’m going to need a better answer than that, Joan,” my doctor told me, looking at his watch.

“Obviously it’s an odd request but... I just feel that... as glad as I am to be rid of it... well, I’d still like to hang on to it,” I tried to explain, touching my heel to the bootstrap of my shoe, since manners didn’t permit knocking on wood—let alone this guys head.

*“That doesn’t exactly answer my question,” he exclaimed, resting his chin in his cupped hand. “I don’t suppose there’s any real problem with it. **But...**”*

“Yeah, I know... it’s nothing like that.”

“Then what is it?”

“It’s... well, this is gonna sound kind of stupid but... it’s a part of my past—and it was a part of me... I just want it... kinda like a scrapbook,” I said, crawling through my words.

He gave a low-browed pose for his reflection in the window before turning to address me. I swallowed my anxiety and sat up straight for the verdict. His eyes dabbled on the side of judgmental. He looked me up and down while his fingers tapped on his desk, leaving a pronounced thump that echoed in my skull. I pulled out of mind to embody his, no doubt, shady

opinion of me. The kind of self deprecating reflection inherent to eating disorders, Catholics, or people who request ‘amputated body parts they endeavored to escape.’ But before I could get into it...

“Alright... you can have it,” he sighed, likely having grown bored with my presence.

“Thanks, Doc.”

“So... how do you plan on... transporting it?”

“Gotcha covered,” I gleamed, turning to the side and reaching for my faded pink, cargo bag. I unbuckled the bag and fished around its innards of crumpled paper until I felt something solid. The dusty glass pickle jar I’d packed into my bag was blanketed in an old, ripped up, magazine. I brushed aside the final sheets from the jar and tossed them aside—catching eye of a dazed model, posing by streetlight.

“That’s not what I meant,” he mumbled, as I slid the pickle jar half-way across his desk.

“Huh?”

“I wasn’t referring so much to the vessel of transport as I was to the means of transportation,” he explained, tentatively pulling the jar towards him. He made a huffing sound and gave me a frustrated look. He hadn’t seen my bag. “I would think overtly carrying a penis in a pickle jar would get you the wrong kind of attention.”

“Not compared to cutting it off in the first place,” I laughed, dotting the i...

Chapter 1

The streetlight was always the focal point. I woke up missing my alarm clock two or three times, striking the table instead, and smelled the damp of my room. Everything was dark, quiet and still. The floor wasn't there or, that's to say it could hardly be seen under the clothes piled atop it. The posters of screaming musicians, whose names I'd forgotten the day after I purchased them, watched over me. They were peeling and, unfortunately, let my bright orange wallpaper shine through. This ghastly decorative feature was complemented by the bare wires poking out of vacant electrical sockets, missing doorknob, and the cigarette charred hole in my wall. I sat on an old mattress that I had managed to salvage from the street corner. It shone of yellow stains that originated from either urine or coffee. Neither managed to dent the high nasal reek of vomit, creeping in from my bathroom. To my right was my disposal area, which consisted of a garbage bag duct-taped to the wall. To my left was the window, illuminated by the solo streetlight, which saved me the trouble of paying my electrical bills most months. And right in front of me were the double-gold doors of my closet, shadowing the dark green door providing entrance to this hell.

“How did I get here?” I groggily asked myself, slowly peeling my pasty lips apart. I stretched my arms and legs, letting out a loud yawn and slight squeal.

I kicked around a little, until the sheets were at my waist. I leaned against the wall, resting my head on Gene Simmon's long black and white

tongue. My ass sank into the mattress and I felt an M&M crush beneath it. As poster-Gene ate out my scalp, I reflected for a moment on my current situation. I thought of last night (or that I knew last night had occurred) and hoped thinking would restore my memory. But I gave up on that when a misplaced hooker walked past my window. Then I focused on what I could do in the middle of the night with no money, but forgot what I'd been thinking once more when a rustling came from outside my door. I lowered my head and bit my lip, frantically checking around my bed for a used condom in case I had fucked someone the night before. Nothing. A moaning floorboard drew my focus and I scowled sharply, staring at the hole in my door reserved for a lost knob. I watched as something moved past the opening. My heart raced and I let out a shrill cry with my voice cracking in the middle. Then, like the sound of a stampede, the hole was filled with the figure of an unknown charging full throttle towards my ugly green door. I said a little prayer against a burglar, rapist, or Jehovah's Witness. I either held my breath or couldn't breathe, as a loud thud came from my door slamming open. And even amidst all of my flinching bravery I couldn't help but cry out, 'Take what you want and leave me alone!'

"Excuse me? And exactly what would I take?" A high pitched voice exclaimed. I cracked my eyes open to see a man standing with his hands on his hips, glaring at me. His rock-and-roll, light denim, worn jeans—with the benefit of cuts on the knees and ass—gave me hope. A long-sleeve, violet, v-neck, 100% cotton shirt, with a Power Puff girl holding up her dress, gave me pleasure. And when my eyes were finally open enough to come to a conclusion, relief was the verdict.

"Jesus Christ, Lillie! You scared the shit out of me!" I yelled, slamming my hands on my mattress. He stood motionless, curling up the top of his mouth until his face reflected the very definition of disgust. I had to have done something wrong, and 'what?' was what I had to find out.

“It’s bad enough that I had to stay in this shit hole over night because of you! But now you’re screaming at me? Well I don’t need this crap.” Lillie bitched, as he shifted his weight from his right side to his left. His arms were now off of his hips and his hands fully extended making gestures while he talked. As his right hand glided up and shook its way back down to his hip, I recalled his show—immediately thinking of dark blue eye shadow and fish net stockings. I shook my head a bit, trying to dismiss my thoughts and pay attention, but Lillie was too angry to be coherent and following him was a dead end.

“Like I’m some kind of fucking servant!” he yelled, continuing on with how infuriated he was, leaving me uninformed on the happenings of the night prior. My head stopped as I stared off into space, trying to remember why he was in my apartment. However, in my doing so, he took it as though I were blowing him off and began to storm out of my bedroom.

“Wait! Why did you have to stay here over night?” I asked, with just enough desperation in my voice to make him stop and turn towards me again. He lifted his hand until it was next to his face and looked at the floor shaking his index finger back and forth.

“Do **not** tell me that you don’t remember last night!”

“I don’t remember last night,” I said hesitantly, squinting and waiting for the fur to fly upon his outraged response. His jaw dropped and he stared at me bug eyed for a moment. He made a few attempts to speak, but only varying degrees of murmurs came out.

“God, you are so pathetic!” he squealed, now enjoying my absent memory and ignorance of whatever stupid thing I should have known I’d done. “Well good luck with that!” he stated, turning once more to leave, only to stop upon my dire request for him to stay.

“Come on Lillie, please! What happened last night?” I cried, slumping my shoulders and pouting. I kept my head down but looked up at his now glowing smile.

“Why exactly should I tell you what happened?” he asked, toying with my curiosity.

“So I can begin to understand just how much I owe you,” I whined, puckering up; not to kiss ass but to lick hole. His smile lessened and turned into more of a smirk. He took his weight off of his leg and stood upright folding his arms across his chest.

“Now that’s a good reason,” he said, gesturing for me to get up and follow him by quickly tilting his head back and to the side. I wobbled to my feet and stepped on my sheet a few times over, tumbling forward into a large heap of clothes. I cursed face down into them, releasing only vaguely recognizable dogmatic damnations directed at circumstance and my clumsy act. After a moments hesitation I sucked in a breath of air, festering with my dirty laundry’s potent repugnance, and flipped to my side like a groggy walrus. Lillie watched me wearily, growing more and more impatient since I hadn’t showed him the proper respect. After a few seconds he walked forward and gracefully extending one of his long legs to kick me in the shoulder. I swatted lazily at him, and sat up out of principal-fury.

“What the hell?” I remarked, rubbing my shoulder that didn’t really hurt.

“Incuse I hadn’t made it clear earlier, hanging out in this flee pit isn’t putting me in a better mood. So I suggest that we get to getting things settled so I can get the hell out of here,” Lillie whispered/hissed, knowing that resorting to violence only worked so much as to get my attention. I whimpered grudgingly at first, but when my nose caught coffee in the air my

motivation became clear. I quickly rose to my feet, ready to follow Lillie wherever he wanted to take me.

I watched Lillie's tall lanky figure stride forward, with his arms positioned at his sides in a perma-feminine stance. He wiggled his hips that contained about as much fat as a runway model fresh out of the john. He turned to the side to check if I were still following him and I could feel his indignation shoot off his sharp cheekbones, keeping me on edge. His dark, short hair, (blotched in places from ruff-sex-tugging-escapades) was matted down on one side from sleeping on my couch. He looked a mess, which would undoubtedly mean I'd be subject to more than his typical 'mad at me' mood.

"Are you making coffee?" I asked, while wrapping my sheet around me to keep my ass from getting cold. He ignored my comment at first as he walked over to the counter, thrusting his chest up and clenching his cheeks.

"Yeah, I thought you'd need it after last night's escapades, but your alcohol tolerance has wowed me once again," he exclaimed, fiddling with a kettle that he had resting on my dormant stovetop.

"How did you get any hot water? Everything I've got to heat it is broken," I said, sitting down on one of three chairs surrounding an old lime green kitchen table. Lillie pulled out two plastic cups from a bag that I had on top of my broken-down, pink, spray-painted, fridge.

"It's not hot, just warm," he said, looking back at me while plopping two instant coffee bags into the cups and chasing them with more coffee. "Your sink's not working in here and there's no way in hell I'd go into your bathroom! So I had to go down to the Chinese restaurant across the street and buy some egg roles to use their washroom," he explained, crumpling up an old cup that he had used for coffee at some point earlier on. "By the way

there are still a few rolls left if you want them... I think they're diseased or something,"

"Thanks," I said, pulling them towards me as Lillie swung around from the counter and dropped into a chair, handing me my drink as he did so. I lifted it to my mouth and took a sip. I slammed my eyes shut and thought of chocolate to keep the gag reflex from kicking in, but after the initial blow I let my bitter face fade to a scowl.

"If you're too good for it, I'll drink it," Lillie remarked, clearly resenting my high standards for night-after-refreshments.

"I'm sorry, I appreciate everything you've done, but it tastes like something died in this," I said, sloshing around my coffee, as I stared into its gooey black depth.

"So what's the last thing you remember happening last night?"

I paused for a moment scanning my memory, trying to find the rewind button. I got a flash of Lillie holding my hair back while I puked my guts out into my bathtub. I saw us getting passed by cab after cab, and Lillie yelling at each of them while they screeched away. A flash of a club, but I wasn't sure which one. Another club came up, but I didn't know if it was the same one or not. Then I remembered us sitting on my torn-to-shit, plaid couch drinking coolers. The gurgling that defined every word I could recall, morphed to clear and distinguished words. 'We're running out of people to discriminate against; pretty soon we're gonna have to admit we don't have a reason for hating each other,' I remembered hearing Dawn, the biggest bitch in all the land, complain.

"We were all sitting around here drinking, and Dawn was talking about prejudicial-fads," I finally replied, after much hesitation and thought. Lillie laughed and took another sip of his coffee—throwing in a little 'commercial enjoyment of his beverage,' before continuing to demean me.

“You know that was over a day ago?” he exclaimed, giving me a sympathetic (for the sake of superiority) look that made me feel even more pathetic.

“Fine, so what happened after that?” I said in a huff, trying to get the whole ‘memory loss’ thing out of mind.

“Before we get to that,” Lillie stated, pulling back his anger just enough to show how concerned he really was. “Are you ok?”

“I’m fine... a little hung over, but...”

“No, not today... lately you’ve been acting like...”

“Like what?”

“Look, I know how hard its been for you since she left you... since the robbery and the funeral, but... what you’re doing to yourself isn’t ok.”

“I’m fine,” I stated, shooting him a cold glare so he’d stop tickling the skeletons in my closet.

“Fine,” he snapped, returning to anger. “Anyway, back to last night... Since we were celebrating April’s promotion, we went where she wanted. But, as always, we got split up on the dance floor. After like an hour or so, we managed to re-group but Dawn found his fuck buddy for the night and ditched.”

“He can be such an asshole,” I grumbled, reaching quarter-cup-gone zone on my coffee.

“Yeah, he sure can be,” Lillie stated in an unimpressed tone. He adjusted his seat and uncrossed his legs so that he could turn to look at me head-on for the upcoming onslaught. “Well somehow in the midst of all the confusion you had run into your old friend, Joe. You remember Joe, right? The one I forbid you to converse with, the cost being our friendship?” he said, lowering his brows, head, voice and my feeling of self-worth.

“Yeah... I remember Joe,” I replied, gulping down some of the putrid goop coffee that I had left in my mouth.

I noted past mistakes, supposed resolve and inevitable regress as Lillie continued to lecture/inform me. He was with out a doubt more upset than he had ever been with me. But, anger I could handle—it was his pity that scared me.

“So, if you remember Joe, then of course you remember what he does?” he half asked, half snapped at me.

“Uh huh,” I said, nodding, while sinking down into my chair cushion that deflated and made a noise like a muffled fart.

“And you’ll never guess what the two of you did while you were talking,” Lillie exclaimed, becoming noticeably more tense. He watched me squint, smile, and then whimper, “Sorry.” “Anyway,” he continued. “by the time we found you, you’d done enough lines to draw a white picket fence.”

“I didn’t OD did I?” I asked, appreciating my coffee, as a sudden zest for life hit me and I thought how things could be so much worse.

“No, you didn’t OD,” Lillie replied, positively pissed and losing his Queen-like charm. “You did however perk up quite a bit... April decided that you were ok to come along with us to another club, seeing as how she was having trouble getting laid where we were. I however was—scratch that **am** furious with you. But I didn’t want to ruin April’s big night by killing you, so we all grabbed a cab and sped away to a dike bar,” he muttered, taking a brief moment to chomp onto one of the egg rolls. “You were deep-fried for the whole ride and were looking at all the pretty lights pass by. I was biting my tongue to keep from screaming and April was fantasizing about whatever cheap trick she’d be hooking up with for the night,” he explained, making the obligatory eating while trying to talk noises. I waited patiently, covered by my puffed-up-white-sheet-tuck-job, complemented by the egg roll crumbs

and diarrhea coffee. Lillie swallowed hard before resuming his eccentrically detailed storytelling and I relaxed as he finally appeared to loosen up.

“Which bar did we go to?” I asked, forgetting that I was walking on eggshells.

“It doesn’t matter, and stop interrupting me!” he yelled, shutting me up. “We arrived and I locked arms with you to keep you from finding another candy store. April sat down at the bar and tried to fend off all of the people hitting on her. You even got a few nibbles yourself, but I managed to keep them away,” he said, pausing momentarily to see whether or not I was going to object to his actions and interrupt once more. I stayed still, watching him glare at me before he hesitantly continued his story. “So, April found the lust of her life and departed from the group, leaving us with the task of finding a way home. I went outside and tried to get a cab, but somehow you managed to grab a hold of a few more Margaritas when I wasn’t looking; I think you swiped them from other people at the bar, but I’m not sure,” he muttered, trying to logically explain my means of inebriating myself behind his back. “So after I’d half-bitten off my tongue, and my eyes rolled back in my head far enough to unplug themselves, I managed to get you to sit down outside.”

“Wait! I remember this part,” I exclaimed, enthused that my incompetence hadn’t completely taken over. “You had me sit down next to this homeless guy, so that I’d have someone to talk to while you called a cab.”

“Do you want to take over from here?” he asked, crossing his arms and leaning back in his chair. I took a quick swig of my coffee, treating it as though I were taking shots of gasoline, and continued.

“I remember he told me his name was Rusty and that he wasn’t really homeless; he just liked the feel of the curb on his ass and the people who were out late at night. He was really... weird... and old, like 60 or

something,” I said, looking up at the ceiling, trying to decipher the fragments of memory floating around in my head.

“Too hot in there for yah?” Rusty asked, his thick accent, making it hard to understand what he said.

“No, my friend wants to leave,” I replied, praying that I wasn’t talking to a drug-induced hallucination. I looked up and down, back and forth, enjoying the movement of my neck. Rusty slid closer to me so that we could hear one another over the traffic/club noise. I didn’t react negatively, so he took the initiative to continue the conversation. I bit down onto one of my bangs that had fallen over my face and turned to focus on Rusty’s curly white beard.

“Couldn’t he get a date?”

“I don’t think anybody was interested,” I said chewing on my hair while observing some water, mirroring the above streetlamp, as it trickled into a gutter.

“Well I’m sure it’s not his fault... I tell you, I’ve been coming to this curb for months now, and I’ve never seen a girl leave here with a fella on her arm. Guess it’s just not a very hot spot for that sort a thing,” Rusty explained, completely clueless regarding the near by club and its attendants.

“Guess not,” I said, losing my balance on the wall and starting to slant to one side. I fluttered my right eyelid while my gaze drifted to the left with my body. I saw Lillie running back and forth in front of me and I laughed despite his despair.

“You fucking asshole! I know you don’t have a fair!” Lillie yelled at a cab, as he stood in the middle of the street, frantically waving his arms.

“Why’s a good lookin’ gal like yourself out at a place like this anyway? Ain’t you married yet?” Rusty asked scratching his gut, which hung out over the tops of his fully extended legs.

“No,” I stated frankly, blinking hard to try and keep reality clear.

“That’s a shame. If someone as attractive as you can’t get married these days, I don’t know what the worlds comin’ to.”

“Times change,” I said, regaining my initial leaning position on the wall.

“I used to be married, you know? Got married out a high school to the most beautiful girl alive. We stayed together for years till one day she just up and disappeared,” he explained, ignoring what I had said and using our conversation as a means of talking about himself.

“She left you?”

“Nah, she died. I don’t know that for sure that is, but I’d like to see someone at her age get away without so much as a peep,” he explained casually, not seeming to be disturbed about what he was saying. “See, she was my teacher and we were havin’ an affair, but after she got pregnant we had to get married.”

“Why?” I exclaimed, fixated on a nearby lesbian couple’s frantically sensual kissing.

“Cause, we couldn’t have our kid growin’ up to be no bastard; that sort of thing just wadn’t done back then. These days though, seems everybody’s a bastard... like it’s the new hip thing to do.”

“Oh.”

“Anyway, we raised that kid up right; up till he moved away and went to college that is. I was so proud. I don’t think I’d ever been happier in

my life. But, after that, me and the misses didn't get along all that good; right up till she died—or disappeared, that is."

"Did you ever find out what happened to her?" I asked, stumbling to my feet as I started to undo my shimmering gold belt, with the oversized, square, silver, buckle.

"Someone said they saw her body floatin' down the river one day, but they couldn't catch it before it went over the falls. Do you believe that for a while they thought I killed her?" he exclaimed, chuckling.

"Yes," I replied in a monotone voice, quite aware that he was no longer paying attention to anything I said.

"I hope they forget the Jaws-of-Life when you get in an accident, you crazy fuck!" Lillie screamed after jumping away from an oncoming cab.

"I could never do anything like that though. She was much too heavy for me to dispose of the corpse right. I don't think I've ever met a woman so small that weighed so much. But I guess the authorities didn't see it my way, and they kept on my case."

"That's nice," I mumbled as I finally managed to get my zipper open. I let my pants go and they slid down neatly to my ankles. I placed both my hands on the back of my hips and exhaled as I started to piss. Rusty didn't seem to notice and kept yammering about his dead wife. The urine trickled down my leg and a puddle started to leech towards the drain, mixing with the water, and the reflection of the streetlight.

"Christ! No wonder we aren't getting any cabs, Joan!" Lillie cried, turning to witness me peeing all over myself. I chuckled lightly as I shook off my imaginary dick. I leaned forward and used the wall for support, resting my forehead against it.

“So your name’s Joan then is it?” Rusty asked, looking up at me romancing the wall.

“Yeah,” I replied, bending down for the mutual purpose of mooning Lillie and pulling up my urine drenched shorts.

“Nice name, but I think ladies are supposed to crouch when they pee.”

“I know, but I used to be a man,” I replied, trying to be as clever as possible while so very, very high. I gave my buckle a quick refastening before I turned awkwardly to face the street.

“Joan, get your nasty ass over here!” Lillie screamed, putting his chest into it and leaning forward. I quickly trotted over to him, as he waited next to the opened door of a taxi.

“Nice talkin’ with yah!” I heard Rusty yell as I dove into the cab as though it were a lake. I managed to sit up, after a few second’s praise for the fluffy back seat, and waved goodbye to him. Lillie got in a moment later and told the driver where to go.

“Sure thing, but what’s that smell?” he asked, curling up his nose and scowling at us. I bit my bottom lip to try and contain myself but it didn’t do any good. As I exploded into a crazed laughter, Lillie groaned and slapped his hands onto his face to conceal the embarrassment. The hilarity of feeling my urine soak into the interior was too much for him to take, and too much for me to keep in.

“And?” Lillie inquired; raising his eyebrows and giving me a bug eyed look of anticipation. I fumbled around with the words in my mouth for a moment, but eventually realized that that was the last thing I remembered.

“I don’t know, I forget,” I replied, drinking my coffee, which was nearly all gone and starting to get thicker towards the bottom.

“Oh. Well, I’ll start from where you left off,” he said, getting off the edge of his seat and nestling into his chair cushion. “The driver took us home just in time for you to start puking your guts out. I brought you inside, pausing occasionally so you could hurl on people’s doormats. When we actually did get upstairs, I dumped you into your bathtub and tried to hose off some of the goop. By the way, the shorts you managed to completely drench in both vomit, and urine, are hanging on the shower faucet,” he said, slowly crumpling up his cup; making sure I knew he was taking his frustrations for me out on it.

There was a brief silence following his disposal of yet another one of my dishes. He glared at me, and I stared into my lap. Eventually I managed to gather the courage to look up at him and say, “I’m sorry.” Once I said those words sincerely he stopped clenching his ass and relaxed. His cheeks started to glow red and he broke eye contact.

“Well as long as you’re ok,” he murmured, rubbing the end of his foot back and forth on the floor. I watched as a sigh of relief escaped his lips and he resumed his typical stereotypical drag queen mannerisms absent of the fury he had tried so hard to convey.

“So, what did we have planned for today?” I asked, the moment before I slammed down the rest of my coffee. The cup smacked my nose and the liquid went down, but I felt something, left inside, slide up against my teeth. I pulled it away from my mouth promptly and gasped. “Fuck Lillie! There’s a cockroach in this!”

Chapter 2

After knocking my spoiled shorts off of the shower faucet, into a plastic bag, I rounded up my entire wardrobe and all the change I had under my couch. Lillie ran all the way home, to take a nice long bubble bath over some phone sex. He had refused to stay any longer after I opened my bathroom door. The decaying chunks of half digested Kraft dinner perma-puked on my wall, offered a pleasant change in color from the pea-green, slime coating the tiles. A chunk of my untrimmed pubic hair dangled from my shorts zipper, and snowed to the ground as I poked at it with a broomstick. A few whacks later and my shorts dropped, collecting all of the hair that had gathered in the bottom of the drain.

I caught a hazy glimpse of the left side of my pale face in the mirror; the right covered by a dark yellow mush. My thin, black hair was matted down and clung to the sweat on my face. There were bags under my eyes that shone of all the beauty of a popped zit. I lifted my hands up, clenching a canister of blush, to play paramedic to my battle scars of stress, sleep deprivation and malnutrition. Once I had applied a thick enough coat to pass for beautiful I resumed noting the places I had vomited on.

A hole in the saran wrap replacing my broken window, vented the smell—giving me momentary glimpses of fresh air. My bathroom's view consisted of a dumpster, with a sleeping bag next to it, and a brick wall. I turned to leave my washroom and grabbed the doorknob, a piece of corn sticking to my palm.

I threw all of my clothes into a large heap on my mattress and sifted through them, disposing of any unwanted remains. Someone's keys, a handful of bottle caps, used condoms and some old cockroach-corpuses were but a few of the treasures present. I ripped the sheet off of my bed and wrapped my clothes in it. I slapped on a pair of too-small-for-me, too-big-for-her, clogs that I stole from my sister when I was younger. I bolted out the door—my destination, the Laundromat located two blocks away. I whistled Whitney Houston and thrust my hips as I trotted down the rust colored stairs. I flung open the door and threw myself out into the world. I tossed my hair back and forth; shaking my head left to right, top to bottom. I felt alive, restless and sober. I grooved as I walked, snapping with my one free hand to the beat of 'Dancing in the Street' playing in my head.

The blue of the night clashed with the cloudy piss-yellow of the descending moon. Shop windows and flashy cars twinkled; shimmering in the dreamy urine-cake-twilight. Moments of undisturbed bliss passed while I strutted to the Laundromat, moving by the only person I'd seen in the night. I flashed her a quick wink when I noticed the cigarette in one hand, and the Diet Coke in the other, portraying to the entire world that, 'I don't care what I do to myself so long as I look good.'

One step in the door and the fun stopped. The blinding white of everything in the place hit me at once. I squinted and raised my hand to my face, bumping my nose. A bald, fat man, sucking on a cherry Popsicle looked over at me momentarily before he pulled his gaze back to the Sports Illustrated laid out in front of him. An old black man with hair whiter than me was passed out in his chair. A load of laundry stopped spinning and woke him sharply. I was alone here, and there would be no time for anything but thought. I slumped down into a chair, chained to a washing machine. I untied the knot I made in my sheet to contain my bulbous wardrobe, and promptly dumped as much as I could into an empty machine. I saw the bald guy check

out my ass when I bent over to pick up a solo, purple ankle sock that escaped from the herd. I dropped it into the arms of its brethren and started a load.

I plopped my bony ass back into a chair and sighed. Everything elongated and I could feel myself brooding energy, growing anticipation. Everyone else in the Laundromat would always give into its mood, but it inspired me. I had to rise up against it, make sure that I stayed alive, free spirited and eccentric. But I was still stuck there, same as everybody else. A buzzing radiator gave definition to the mood as I stared blankly into the swirling vortex of my laundry.

A toilet flushes and backs up in my memory. My mother yells at me and tells me to 'unplug it' while she stands over me with her arms crossed. I reluctantly dive up to my elbows in toilet water; thrusting back and forth on the plunger like I were giving a hand job to an elephant. Her face makes it a 'Kodak' moment when one of many used condoms explodes out of the toilet and plops into her mouth. Then, like a fool, I laugh so I hard it brings me to tears of a different sort than my mothers...

I cried my eyes out standing in front of the bathroom, gazing into the white abyss of a blue-silhouetted woman wearing a skirt. I sniffled, whined and gave a look like I unsuspectingly sat on a butt plug. I tried to pull my kilt up to blow my nose, but I remember just in time that I hadn't worn any underwear. Lillie rolled his eyes and pulled me up against him so I could sob on his shoulder. But my mascara tears rubbed off onto his shirt, and his well of patience went dry...

Buying eye shadow, I got weird looks from left, right, and from the mirror in front of me. The sales woman held back, thinking that I was playing

a joke. I tried samples, remembering the concept of confidence and how great it would be at a time like this. I lifted my brows and winked at myself. I scratched my ass, walked to the counter and paid off the bitch. She made a quirk about my choice and I retorted with a comment about, "how I would have expected more from a Wal-Mart employee." Her Barbie doll figure and peanut brain collided to make her neck lean back, face distort and upper lip curdle. I smiled, of course...

The alarm to my daydreaming sounded when the washing machine bell tolled. I picked out my wedgy and wobbled to my feet. The old man was gone, replaced now with the person I'd winked at out front of the place. We made eye contact long enough for us to both look away, uncomfortably, and then resumed our loads. The point where most people would fold their things to take them home is where I'd chuck them back into my sheet (having been recently drawn out of the wash itself). Taking a clump of clothes off of the chair next to the one I was sitting in, I threw them into the machine. The door clanged shut and I paid the toll, before I could slip back to my own little world.

A few quarters rattled around in the bin until they fell into the slit at the bottom of the tollbooth. Dawn repositioned his ass on his seat and I slumped down in mine. We hadn't said a thing since he picked me up. I knew he wanted to, that he was going to, and even what it was going to be when he finally came out with it. I frowned and crossed my arms across my chest, inadvertently bringing attention to the wrong area.

"So, can I see?" he asked glancing over at me, as he pulled into the right lane.

“No, you can’t see!” I yelled, scowling and turning my knees to face as far away from him as I could.

“Well did it turn out well? What you expected?”

“I don’t know... I haven’t gotten used to it yet,” I replied, uncomfortable and awkward while we sped down the highway.

“Just a peek?”

“Fuck off, Dawn.”

“After you’ve had a while to adjust, then can I see?”

“No.”

“Please?” he said, grinning widely, trying to pass his charm off on me.

“You’re not gonna get a look, so just shut up.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Cause I said no!”

“But why?”

“Cause I don’t wanna fucking show you! I’m not a god damn sideshow because of it!” I shouted, snarling and spraying him lightly with spit.

“Fine. You don’t have to be such a bitch about it.”

“Well, if you’d just leave me alone there wouldn’t be a problem.”

“Fine.”

“Fine.” I said, as we came to rest behind another car.

Dawn glanced over at me with the corner of his eye and took his right hand off the wheel. I shuddered and placed my hands on my crotch while moving my shoulders forward, trying to conceal my new breasts. After

this Dawn took his last chance and copped a feel. I inhaled like I was taking the hoot of my life, and screamed as loud as I could...

A knife slid into the main character's chest as she released a scream, drowning out my cheer. April sat next to me laughing; her popcorn had fallen all over me when she jumped from the surprise. I hadn't noticed, as I was too enthused about the character's recent demise. Looking down at my jeans covered in popcorn a grin spread wide across my face. The rest of the audience enjoyed the climax of the movie as April nibbled golden kernels off of my crotch. I put my arm around her and pushed out my beer-bloated stomach, to imitate the hillbilly sitting four rows in front of us. She giggled and lifted another piece of popcorn to her mouth. The credits rolled and after she'd finished with the feast off my lap I stood up.

"Shit! The butter makes it look like I pissed myself!" I screeched as April burst into laughter...

I went in and out of reality and fantasy; dodging the painful memories while embracing the good. It was one of those euphoric trains of thought that didn't derail to heartbreak, headache, or mistake. I had managed to remember so much that not only was I restless from being on my ass, but I was happy too. I rounded up my clothes and tied up my sheet, throwing it over my shoulder. The radiator made its final noise as I stepped out the door, leaving my soiled shorts behind.

When I arrived home, smelling and smelling of my laundry, I sang a little song and ignored my surroundings. I was wired; sitting still had made me want to explode and, despite Lillie's endless requests for me to stay at home, I decided I wanted to go out. I received mental flashes of different outfits. What would match what best? Which club to go to? I stopped in mid-

thought when I saw a shimmering coin on the ground. It wasn't copper, so I bent down (without moving my knees), to pick it up. However, as I did so I felt someone's genitals push up against my vulnerable ass and two hands come to rest gently on the back of my hips. I held my breath, feeling all of the blood rush out of my face. I opened my mouth unable to scream, gasping instead. I felt the tears on their way as my spine curdled. I jumped forward a few feet and quickly turned to face the perpetrator.

"You always did have a nice ass, although I must say it looks much better now," I heard a man say, grinning and exposing his piss colored teeth to me. His scruffy, dirty-blond, bed hair that was too messy to be stylish curled down to his unshaven face. He wore a ripped and tattered button up denim shirt over a black Hard Rock Café t-shirt. He smelled of orange juice and reminded me of someone I used to know from a life I'd since forgotten.

"Tim!" I yelled, opening my eyes as wide as I could and dropping my jaw. "Where the fuck have you been?"

"Well it's nice to see you too."

"I'm sorry. I'm just very surprised to see you. I thought you moved to Chicago."

"No. It takes money to move, and as we both know I don't have any. Besides, I couldn't get Mark to come along, and God knows I'm not going anywhere without him," he said adoringly, looking up and to the right as he thought of his boyfriend.

"Oh right! How is Mark anyway?"

"He's good, thanks."

"Is he still fighting over you?" I asked, in reference to a time when Mark had bitch slapped an elderly woman who was eyeing Tim.

"No, fortunately he trusts me enough to resist other people."

“Even me?”

“Now, now—no one could resist you,” he stated, lightly nudging my arm while he spoke.

“So where are you staying?” I asked, following a quick leap into his open arms, which had been waiting for a long overdue hug.

“By the dumpster—you know the one your bathroom window looks out on. By the way, are you ok? You looked like you were gonna die last night,” he exclaimed, making me feel completely worthless.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I muttered. “Why are you sleeping by the dumpster? You know you can always stay at my place,” I said, changing the subject as quickly as I could manage.

“Oh I wouldn’t want to be a bother... and besides, I’d prefer a dumpster from what Lillie told me about your place—I’m so sorry that happened to you,” he said, letting gravity take hold, causing all of his facial muscles to slump, giving me a pitiful look.

“Thanks,” I replied, choking on the backed up tears as I directed my attention to the ground. There was a long silence afterwards. I felt like breaking down and throwing a tantrum, but I kept my spirits up for Tim’s sake. After all, his problems were much worse than mine. We chatted for a while; small talk mostly, to avoid the big problems that we were both trying to forget. Eventually it came down to a kiss on the cheek and a friendly hug ‘goodnight.’

Tim retreated to his dumpster to sift through trash while I went up to my apartment to get ready for the night ahead. It’s always nice to have people you’ve forgotten jumpstart your memory to happy times. Always—except when you’ve become a disaster. So much had changed since Tim and

I were friends. He was fortunate enough to miss most of the bad but just in time to see me at my worst. I needed a night out now more than ever.

I clawed through my things, trying to find the proper accessories to get me laid while still being respectable. When I had grabbed an aqua-colored, spaghetti-string, latex top that fell to just above my belly button, I immediately thought of my dark denim, capri pants that were so tight I had to avoid eating and shit three times before I could fit into them. I walked to my closet, tidied my wardrobe and kicked aside the pickle jar (containing the remains of my former penis) to get at my pants.

Chapter 3

I had always assumed the reason charcoal was used was because the taste was so vile it would induce vomiting. However, this is not the case. Apparently it's used to absorb the contents of your stomach. Of course, I had no idea that I had ingested it until I picked out a previously un-tapped flavor capsule, lodged in the back of my mouth. The way it looks strongly resembles oil, and the taste isn't much better. My vision was blurry which I didn't understand because from what I remembered I was having a good time. The ceiling was littered with white lights, leaving me to conclude that between the phones, drones, and moans I was either in a department store or a hospital. I turned to my left to see April crying. Dawn was holding her close to him, not so much to comfort her as to shut her up. She blew her nose with a Kleenex pulled from a box labeled 'hospital property,' and Dawn pulled her closer yet. This time he wasn't trying to quiet her down, but rather mute her completely.

"I wouldn't go so far as to call it a mid-life-crisis; just more of a dilemma!" A forty-year-old man yelled to me, as I pretended to like him to get free drinks.

"Then why don't you just buy a new car or something?" I asked, rushing through my Martini, so I wouldn't have to sit and talk to him much longer.

“I already have too many as it is! Besides, it’s the experience of being young that I’m in pursuit of; not an excuse to flaunt my wealth!”

“And what’s the experience of being young?” I screamed, as they cranked the base up and the dance floor exploded behind me. The swirling neon lights and lasers projected on every wall, making my mouth water and blood boil. Pulsating waves of green and blue elliptical effects surrounded me. I felt trapped and obligated to converse, if only to milk my next drink. It’s not until you’re poor that you realize just how expensive alcohol is and thank god that there are desperate men to buy it for you.

“You’ll know when you’re old!” he laughed, clearly not accustomed to keeping things simple in a loud environment.

“Come on! Try and explain it to me! Maybe I could help you!” I exclaimed, placing my empty glass down on the counter. He quickly got me another one and resumed the conversation. I decided to stay with him since my next target had taken a tumble into a blatantly under-aged group of girls. They danced with the naïve and innocent freedom that would pave the way for their innate sexual power, realized after years of ill spent sexcapades. I smiled at their attempts to prove their maturity by flaunting their sexuality; undoubtedly leading to needless fucks for validation.

“It’s like being free! Only you don’t know it until you’re caught!”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I inquired, laughing at him and his intoxicated attempts to convey something more than escalating flirtation.

“When I was younger I had obligations, and responsibilities! But they didn’t matter because they were to myself and I didn’t care what I did to myself! Now I have kids, a wife, and a God damn mortgage to pay off! Being young is all about fleeting pleasures! And I don’t mean the sex or the drugs because those things never go away! What I’m talking about is the feeling of

being carefree because you don't have anything of any real importance to care about! That's the experience of being young!"

"How much have you had to drink?" I asked, as he took a shot of Rum, his face reflecting that of a visceral orgasm.

"Enough to be nostalgic!"

"So then what's the solution?"

"To what? My dilemma? I'd say a brief indulgence to remind me that I'm not young any more, and that I don't really want to be!" he exclaimed, indirectly hinting that his desire was to fuck—as if it wasn't obvious already.

"Then what's with that whole 'experience of being young' idea?"

"I don't know! I'm just a middle-aged drunkard spouting out bullshit! Frankly I'm surprised you've sat through it as long as you have!"

"At least I got a few free drinks out of it!" I yelled, using the subject's close as my window to disappear. I plopped off of the stool, making a less-than-perfect landing onto my high heels. "Well I hope you've gotten the experience you were looking for!"

"Wait! How about a blowjob?" he asked, standing up and wobbling until he fell against the side of the bar.

"No, sorry! I don't have any room in my stomach for cum!" I replied, overlooking his nauseating advance. I turned sharply and disappeared into a sea of people and flailing limbs. The beat of a remix that no one could follow pounded in my skull, deafening me as I momentarily looked back to see the pitiful man I had talked to approach the underage girls. I laughed gaily at the match made in heaven and sat down by my mark, starting once again.

Nobody was talking to me. They acted as though I were a pestering child whose tantrum they simply wouldn't tolerate. I watched Lillie walking towards my room appearing as though he'd seen a ghost. April had calmed down and was now sitting in a standard bedside chair. Dawn had retreated to the bathroom to masturbate, and I was trying to figure out the two and two of things. I farted just loud enough so that April heard, but she only glared at me when I smiled. I hated it when my friends were serious. But I could tell by their faces that I had fucked up badly enough to lose my right to complain.

I slid down from my sitting position until I was lying flat on my back. My bare ass rubbed against the sheet and I wondered just how 'skid mark free' the bed was. I flipped over to my side and nestled my arm under a pillow; closing my eyes just before Lillie walked in. He and April started talking between themselves, thinking that I was asleep. "Inconsiderate asshole," this and, "I don't care about her if she doesn't care about herself," that. I tried my best to ignore them and focused instead on remembering the night before. I got a flash of me trying to remember the night before, the night before and laughed. As a result, April and Lillie stopped their conversation and looked over at me.

"Fuck," I muttered, as the jig was obviously up. I turned towards them and shuddered. They had something to say, and the IV in my arm meant running from it was no longer an option.

"The only problem is that they fucked up the operation! The mother fuckin' implant burst, and that shit spread! Like fuckin' seriously, I felt a chunk in her hand man! Shit felt just like a tit!" A drunken college student—who had recently turned twenty-one, loved bunnies, Audi's, blondes, and talking about himself—told me. "Man this place is fuckin' nuts! Shit man!"

"Yeah, really nuts," I sarcastically said, under my breath.

“What?”

“I said I’m thirsty!”

“Serious? Ok! Hey bartender! Gimme a beer man!” he hollered, leaning forward and raising a hand.

“So, where you from?” I asked, accepting my free beer while remaining as charming as I could bear, considering the company.

“I’m from Chicago! The mother fuckin’ windy city man!”

“And what brings you here?”

“I go to school here! Plus I fuckin’ love big cities! None o’ that country shit for me! Breathe fumes, piss blood and shit... fuckin’ shit man!” he exclaimed, fumbling on his words, adding to what an ass he was making of himself. “What about you man? What... what are you doin’ here?”

“I live here!”

“Why man?”

“Cause it’s my home!”

“But like, if you could live anywhere else, where would you live?”

“Russia!” I replied, putting absolutely no thought into it what so ever, and already checking out the options to hit up for my next few drinks.

“Russia! Fuck man! Fuckin’ cold there man! Plus there’s all that communism and shit! I remember this Russian chick came to my high school, and like didn’t speak any English! Fuckin’ couldn’t understand a fuckin’ thing that chick said man!”

“I can imagine what that must have been like!” I said, implying the same towards him. He took a double shot of vodka; only half way through the

second shot it started to come back up and splattered all over the bar. I stood up and wiped the puke from my glass onto his shirt; remaining by his side just long enough to watch a bouncer haul him out the door.

You could cut the tension with a chainsaw as April and Lillie fed off of each other's anger. They didn't speak at first, choosing to glare at me instead. We all heard a squeak come from the bathroom as Dawn exhaled quickly, gradually reaching a climax. Lillie wasn't crying, but his eyes were watering and I could tell that this time he wasn't mad; he was hurt. I wanted to explain myself, to come up with some justification for my stupidity, but then I remembered that I was ignorant. I had no defense, no memory, no clue, and my recollection of the night/day/whatever before was as of yet, trite.

A page frantically flipped, and we all knew that Dawn was giving it his all. Lillie bit his bottom lip and looked away from me. April resumed crying and fell into the comforting shoulder of Lillie, which had been waiting for her. He then began to sob a little and leaned on April, leaning on him. I felt like shit. I had objections, means to try and pry the information from their lips, but really I didn't want to know. Although I had been a frequent customer of the hospital, it was never like me to shop under such circumstances. I fiddled with my thumbs, looked into my lap and sunk into memory.

"Ups, downs, highs, lows, natural, chemical, powder, crystal, plant, fungus, candy, pills, and of course intravenous," some kid named Mechy told me as he pointed from corner to corner of a kit he'd pulled out of his pants.

"What's the exchange rate?" I asked, scratching an itch that I knew I shouldn't be touching.

“One for one, unless you swallow; that gets you extra.”

“How much extra?”

“Two for one.”

“Why the bonus?”

“A little fetish of mine; that and these bathrooms are dirty enough as it is.”

“Yeah, I’m sure that’s why,” I said sarcastically, swallowing hard as I repositioned myself on to my knees. The dark red walls that surrounded the toilet were littered with graffiti and numbers to call for quick STD-filled fucks. I could hear a deep voice on the other side of the stall telling someone in a similar predicament to ‘bite it.’ The toilet made a clanking noise after I peeled the back of my shirt from it. I regrettably looked up at Mechy’s face once more; his smile burning a hole in my conscience.

“Just breaking the ice,” he said, rubbing his crotch while checking me out.

“Fine, but don’t talk from here on and if you grunt or touch my hair I’m biting your dick off,” I said, taking my resentment towards what I was doing out on him.

He laughed at my comment, thinking that I wasn’t serious, and leaned against the closed door of the stall as I unzipped his pants. A pair of underwear sporting the phrase ‘fuck bro’s, to fuck ho’s’ became clear when I pulled his waistline down. A bulge grew in my hands as I began massaging it. I started from the back and worked up to the front, pulling his underwear down in the process. A big rubbery dick flopped out and my heart sank. Normally I would have been thrilled, but due to the situation it was mortifying.

We all heard Dawn groan and exhale as he blew his load in the bathroom. There was a brief pause afterwards followed by a toilet flush and the sound of someone washing their hands. He emerged from the restroom a moment later, rosy cheeked and flustered. He walked confidently over to Lillie's side and crossed his arms; fitting right in with the crowd. The sound of the inevitable filled the air, as Lillie opened his mouth making a sound louder than anything I had heard in a long time.

"Hey," he said faintly, his voice higher than usual, as he choked on his tears.

"Hey," I replied, changing from looking at him to my lap every few seconds.

"So I guess you're ok then."

"I guess."

"Do you know what happened?"

"Kind of,.. but... not really." I said, realizing half way through my sentence that I needed to do nothing but be truthful and apologetic. I'd fucked up enough in my life to know how to behave when caught.

"Well you can imagine how bad it must have been to get you here."

"Yeah," I said, a long silence following immediately afterwards. "Did you want me to tell you what I know?" I asked, trying to be cooperative.

"No, we don't need to know; don't want to either."

"I'm sorry," I whined, trying to emphasize the sincerity that I thought important for me to feel.

"You don't even know what you've done," he stated, his head shaking and face shriveling.

“I know, but whatever it was I know I don’t want to be here. So I’m sorry that I’ve done anything to be here. To make you be here.”

“That’s not good enough,” he muttered, letting April slowly drift away from his shoulder while he spoke to me.

“Can you tell me what I did?”

“If you want to ask the doctor maybe he’ll tell you but I won’t. I’m tired of filling in for your memory,” he said, obviously speaking for himself and the rest of the group. “I asked you not to go out Joan. I fucking begged you, but you did anyway and now you’re here.”

I gave a blank stare to my crotch and cringed when I pulled up to see how utterly distraught Lillie was. “All I can do is say I’m sorry,” I stated, keeping my voice to a near whisper.

“Bullshit. I’ve heard you say you’re sorry for almost a year now and it never changes a thing. All you do is fuck up and we have to keep picking up after you, like you’re a Goddamn infant... I’m sorry that so many terrible things have happened to you, but it’s not like you can just put your shit on us and expect us to grin and bear it.”

“That’s not fair. I’ve never been this bad before, and I’m sorry if you’ve had to look after me, but I didn’t ask you to do it,” I cried, getting defensive at the mention of my past.

“No, you didn’t. But if we hadn’t been there time after time, you wouldn’t be here. I mean how can you be so fucking stupid?”

“And you’re so much better? Like you’ve never done drugs? Never fucked to get somewhere or something? Don’t be so hypocritical. You and I both know that I’ve helped you out just as much as you’ve helped me.”

“I know you helped me, and I’ve thanked you a hundred times for it. But I grew up. I stopped before I lost control and I didn’t look back.”

“Great, so you’re some kind of fucking saint because you quit first, you never looked back—if only I could be more like you!”

“This isn’t about me, so cut the shit and face the facts. You have the problem and refuse to get help.”

“It’s not that bad and you know it, so stop exaggerating.”

“Not that bad? You almost died last night, Joan! And for what? To get high? Was it worth it? Did you get your fix? Find a magic pill to make all your problems go away?”

“Fuck you.”

“No, fuck you. If you want to kill yourself that’s fine, but don’t depend on me to help you through it anymore. I don’t have the energy to drag you home night after night, staying by your side and hoping that you’ll wake up in the morning.”

“Then don’t! Leave me at the club, or the bar or wherever the fuck you think you’re delivering me from and I’ll make out fine. I’m doing better than you did.”

“Fine, you’re doing just great. But I won’t be around to see you die. Maybe you’re ok with it but I’m not,” he said, slowing down after my mention to his previous drug use and addiction.

“So what, you’re just going to leave? Some friend. I stuck by you, I cleaned you up and helped you every bit as much as you did me.”

“So you’re stronger than I am, congratulations.”

“Yeah I am stronger. Because I didn’t leave you in the bathroom, I didn’t dump you at the hospital and tell myself that ‘now it’s ok because it’s somebody else’s problem.’ I’m still fucking here and I’d do it again!”

“I know I had a problem! I know that I did just as many terrible things as you! But it’s because of that that I can’t sit around and watch you do this. How can you expect me to be able to take care of you considering what I’ve been through?” Lillie exclaimed, his voice shrinking as he drew to a close.

“I expect you to do for me what I did for you! Not to be so fucking selfish! Help someone in need!”

“I tried! You fucking know I tried! You can take a horse to water but you can’t make it give up drugs! If you know you have a problem then do something about it! Is it worth losing your friends over?”

“No... but I can’t stop,” I stated slowly, knowing very well that I could and needed to. I stared into my lap, rubbing my thumbs together, thinking of my borderline addiction and its consequences. I pitied myself more than anything and my sense of logic was defecated. Lillie was right, but I couldn’t admit it. I let my resentment for his leaving intrude on my better judgment and, consequently, victimized myself.

“Horse shit. You won’t stop. You won’t go to anyone for help, even when you need it most; and until you do I can’t see you anymore.”

“You’re so fucking selfish,” I muttered, growing detached—seeking refuge in denial.

“What do you want me to do? You know you need help but you won’t let anyone near you! I’ve made myself clear here, and until you’re sober—if you’re ever sober—we can’t be friends,” Lillie said, ending the conversation as he exited the room in a huff. Dawn and April were left standing where they had been before. They hadn’t said a word the entire time Lillie and I had been arguing, but after he left they broke their silence.

“My reasoning’s different than Lillie’s, but I know that I can’t be around you anymore; it hurts me too much to watch you do this to yourself,” April said, staring at me, her eyes watering and turning pink. Her clothes were pale and faded, leaving me to conclude that she was dressed for disaster. The usual rosy color of her skin seemed to vanish before me and I felt panic approach.

“You’re leaving, too? What is this the intervention from hell?”

“No, we couldn’t afford one. This is about us running out on you, to give you some incentive to fix yourself up. I’m sorry that Lillie refused to stick by you and help. If he had, then maybe I would have been able to too... but as it is I don’t have the strength to help you alone—I hope you understand.”

“No! I don’t fucking understand! You’re deserting me to make me better? You’re dumping me because you care? This is bullshit! It’s just a stupid fucking excuse to get out of the friendship because you’re all too cowardly to do the right thing!” I screamed, becoming erratic as I poured my heart out to a vulnerable April standing before me.

“And what’s the right thing Joan?”

“I don’t know! But it sure as hell can’t be this! You could lock me in my room until I’ve forgotten all about drugs and alcohol. You could beat the shit out of me, take away all of my clothes, follow me wherever I go, but you can’t just fucking walk out!”

“None of those things would work and you know it. We have to leave because our friendship is the only thing that you care about. If we stayed, you’d never stop.”

“I don’t fucking believe this!”

April winced and put her arms straight by her side. She glanced over at the door that Lillie had left open for her. She didn't respond to what I said and instead just tapped her fingers on her side, as she always did when she was uncomfortable. Dawn had picked a string out of his jacket and wrapped it around his finger to turn it purple. He obviously wasn't paying attention to what was being said.

"April please don't leave," I sobbed, my anger dissolving as she turned to exit. I was pissed at Lillie because he owed me for what I'd done for him. I knew what Dawn was thinking and what he was going to do. But I was afraid of losing April—I couldn't stand to watch her walk out on me again. Desperation soaked into my voice and I tried pleading with her.

"I have to leave," she said, giving me a look of utter sorrow.

"No you don't. I'll quit, I promise I will. If I don't, then you can leave; but you have to give me another chance."

"I can't Joan."

"If you stay Lillie will come around. I know I'll get through this I just can't do it alone."

"I know you'll get through it," she said in a dry and withered voice.

"Then you'll stay right? I just need some support, and a few rules to go by."

"No... I know you'll get through this, but you're going to have to do it alone," she finished, striking me with her words hard enough to kill a moose. She turned away quickly and left the room following Lillie's tracks. My eyes fell back to my lap and I exhaled. My heart sank, and I looked up once more, remembering that Dawn was still in the room.

He was biting the string off of his finger and making noises like an angry puppy. I stared blankly at him for a while until he managed to get the

string off. Once he had, he formed it into a ball and threw it at the unconscious guy sharing the room with me. We made eye contact and he shrugged his shoulders prior to his departing remark that I had been anticipating ever since he came out of the bathroom smelling of his own cum.

“Everybody’s doing it,” he said, turning and exiting the room. I concentrated on his footsteps and, then, the lack thereof. I was left in shock and disarray; with nothing to comfort me but the exposed genitals of my temporary roommate.

Chapter 4

The half bald, old lady started to gain on the fat, one-legged wheelchair guy as I stabbed my Jell-o with a spork. It was red, which could mean anything from fruit punch to raspberry. I had just finished forcing down my overcooked spaghetti with meatless meat sauce and its side of soggy garlic toast, to bask in the glory of boredom. The daily exercise of my fellow patients, which I closely related to a Formula 1 race, had commenced. The jittery string bean who always put his left foot further out than his right, kept first place. Sometimes he would even lap the others but it was likely because of the medication he was on. Nurses would zoom by, making it appear as though the other competitors, running their laps, were locked in a retarded time zone. They never noticed me of course, isolated in my bed, watching them from afar. I didn't want them to see me. All I wanted was to leave and forget that any of this had happened.

“What, you thought I forgot what happened?” my sister snapped, as I stood surrounded by her snooty, arrogant, spoiled friends. They were the text book in-crowd—dumb, beautiful, rich and stuffed with enough hormones to burst an ostrich. They would always catch me off guard in my feeble attempts to avoid them—the uncanny execution of which made me suspect they had an agenda to torment me. “I’m talking to you twerp!” she yelled, smacking me on the back of the head.

“I don’t know,” I muttered, rubbing my hands together, trying to spot an opening between her friends to slip through.

“You guys ’ll never believe what a little perv this kid is. I found him in my room once trying on my bikini!” she howled, a chorus of laughter and disgust traveling the full circle of her friends.

“Shut up, Sarah!” I screamed, pushing her back into the door. For a moment surprise kept her at bay. I had never fought back beyond telling my parents or throwing a tantrum. But her hesitation was fleeting, if more mercy than I had received before.

I hesitantly ate my food, thinking of how easily I could tie together sheets to use as a rope in an escape attempt. But then I thought of how hard it would be to get a cab in hospital pajamas. My temporary roommate rolled about in his bed, as much as his various casts would allow, and came to look at me. He concocted a slimy smile, having decided that we needed to be better acquainted, making me shudder with apprehension.

“Is it strawberry or watermelon?” my bunkmate asked, watching me with his one bandage free eye.

“I can’t tell,” I replied, sloshing the Jell-o around my mouth.

“My theory is that it isn’t really one flavor. I think that they just take all of the excess packets they have left over from the stuff they make for the doctors, and mix them together to get this crap.”

“Maybe,” I said, glaring at the broken TV, the absence of which made this idiot always want to talk to me. Earlier he had introduced himself; told me his story, views, theory’s, ideas, likes, dislikes and a whole bunch of other shit that made me envy anyone with amnesia.

“Like it’s not enough that we have to pay to be here, but on top of that the living conditions are shit!” he exclaimed, as I rolled my eyes over to look at him.

This genius managed to get two hundred dollars worth of fire works to go off at the same time in his ex-girlfriends apartment. Problem was that he hadn’t anticipated the building catching fire, let alone any of them hitting him. So he jumped out of the third story window on to his car parked outside. The police found him trying to drive away, in the very car he had smashed up when he jumped. Only he was so injured that he had driven into a magazine vendor just a few blocks away. Then, like he hadn’t fucked up enough as it was, they found his girlfriends crushed poodle (which he had used to break his fall) in his duffle bag.

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” my sister barked. She furiously threw me against the wall and I fell to the ground too scared to move. Her friends fell silent, each one as afraid to stand up to her as me. I could see her eyes flare with rage but she had enough sense to know a public display here would lead to gossip and hurt her image at school. She turned quickly, her friends following in stride glancing back at me out of pity. I lay still until they were gone and then pulled myself up. I heard their cackling laughs once more and felt anger pulse through me. Tears billowed and I let out a muffled scream between my teeth.

I stormed into my Sister’s room and thought frantically of how to pay her back. I looked around her pink palace at discarded dollhouses now used only to furnish mascara and store her diaries. She had posters of boy bands and bimbos; a river of nail polish and a wall-sized antique mirror showcasing a frail figure, clenching his fists with tears streaming down his cheeks. I’d always known her to demean me and call me names—she was

thirteen after all. But there was something unjust this time, something I needed to rebel against. I stared at myself, barely recognizing who I saw. Nothing I could do would matter; no amount of destruction would validate me beyond the ensuing beatings. I collapsed onto Sarah's bed and sobbed.

When I managed to compose myself enough to think coherently I quickly made my way to the door, terrified that I might be discovered. However, along the way I caught eye of a pair of clogs calling my name. Nothing special, and certainly nothing my sister would miss beyond an excuse to beat me. So I grabbed them and tucked them beneath my shirt, rushing to my room to hide the evidence just in time for dinner.

“Food’s probably drugged anyway. They’re always trying to test new things on you here without you knowing it. We’re just big lab rats,” my roommate exclaimed. I frowned and fell back into my pillow, trying to think of a root canal or being shot. For a moment, when I thought of contracting flesh-eating bacteria, I managed to forget that he was still talking—but it didn’t last.

“Yesterday I caught one of the nurses in here when she thought we were sleeping. She just came in, stopped and then left. I think she knew I was looking at her... probably why she didn’t do what she really wanted to.”

The wheelchair guy sped up just enough to come neck and neck with the string bean. I bit my lip in suspense, but when his tire went over a small puddle of piss left by the old lady, he spun off to the side and knocked over a tray of medical equipment.

“TV’s probably not even broken. They just won’t give us the chance to watch it because they want us to talk. We’re on camera you know. I’m serious. They’re watching us right now. Why else would that red light be on?” he asked, pointing to the smoke detector.

I pulled the pillow out from behind my head and placed it over my face. I punched myself repeatedly, causing the sound of this dumbass to be lightly silenced, but not enough so I couldn't understand the bullshit he was spouting.

“But if that is a camera, where's the microphone? Maybe it's in the TV. Yeah, why else would it be in here? They think they're so smart but they don't know I know,” he said, rambling off into his own delusion until it crapped out into an insane laughter.

“The microphones not in the TV,” I stated, pulling the pillow away and glaring at him.

“Then where is it?” he asked, in a cowardly voice, eyeing the black abyss of the television.

“I'm wearing it.” I said, fully opening my eyes and tilting my head back.

He gasped and violently looked away from me. He flipped to his side so as not to face me, pulled up his sheet and didn't say a word. I chuckled lightly, having momentarily forgotten the recent occurrences in my life. I looked out of my window to try and catch the last few laps, but they had stopped circling and were now tucked away in their rooms. When things were quiet I got scared. I'd think about how much I'd fucked up, rather than how fucked up I was going to get. I kind of sniffled at first, but that sound made me sob which in turn made me cry. I dropped my head into my hands, whimpering, and looked to my side as my roommate grabbed his head and covered his ears.

“Stop trying to get me to talk!” he screamed, misconstruing my tears for an attempt to make him speak. I stopped crying and gave the back of his head a look of hilarious confusion. I started laughing and squinted, dulling all

of my senses in a combination of tears, snot, and the humbling realization that my friends were right—as hard as it would be, I needed this.

After my sister's friends left I received my just due. I cried for hours after it stopped hurting. My parents gave her a stern talking to, and me my well earned bandages, along with the fatherly advice that 'men don't cry.' I retreated to my room, examining my new shoes with a shadow of doubt. I had stolen a tangible stigma—one I adored beyond the notion of a victory trophy. I needed this.

Chapter 5

On the day of my long overdue release from the hospital, I desperately searched for an exit in the white corridors of its winding, medical-labyrinth. Since everyone who could have picked me up had recently left me for dead, my options were limited to public transportation or taking a cab. I didn't have the patience for anything short of immediate service so I decided on a taxi. But first I had to get far away from the hospital to avoid the infamous judgment of the driver.

I had entered a state of sobriety that I misconstrued for resolve. My plan was to get a plan. I needed to think ahead of urge and craving; to consequence and reform. To look past the momentary indulgences of my habituary. But, most of all, I needed to face the reality that I had tried so hard to hide.

Once outside, and sufficiently far away from the hospital, I whipped my arm upward as though I were swatting a fly. A cab swerved to the side and came to rest at my feet. I opened the door, plopped myself in and gave the typical directions; absent of greeting the driver or acknowledging that he was, in fact, human. He muttered some sort of confirmation, but quickly stopped to scream at a "matha' fuckin' tourist!" desperately fighting for air in the sea of traffic. I made an exasperated sigh of relief as I slid down in my seat, trying not to notice the sleazy driver or his continuous glances to check me out.

“So what are your plans for tonight?” the driver asked winking at me. I handed him a twenty and seriously contemplated strangling him. I had grown accustomed to men being sexually audacious. But, for some reason, nothing pissed me off more than when I wasn't in the mood.

“Oh, well let me think. I'll probably just go upstairs and watch TV. All the while hoping that some fat, bald, greasy, but ugly, loser will come and give me the fuck of a lifetime; which I'm so very sure he's capable of, with his tremendous gut,” I replied in a tone that crossed my frustration for the world with pure, uncut, sarcasm—sobriety was angrier than I remembered.

“Fuck you, yah god damn whore,” he exclaimed, reluctantly handing me my change.

“You wish,” I stated climbing out of the cab, flipping him a quarter for a tip, which hit him in the eye.

I took a deep breath and looked up at the dull reflection of light bouncing off my bedroom window. I quaked at the thought of entering to see things as they were. But the last thing I wanted was to dwell on the past. So I picked up my spirits, cracked a smile and started a strut. The vacant street gave me that cozy feeling of being home. I thought of how I was going to start all over; get fit, do the right thing, find a lover, live. But all of my fantasies were tainted and looked something like pleasant acid flashbacks. I glanced off to the right, by the dumpster to see Tim heading towards me. I ditched the smile, snuffed the strut, and braced for impact.

“What happened to you?” Tim asked, blocking my entrance to my building unless I answered his questions. I looked over each of his shoulders, thinking that I could take him and charging was always an option.

“What are you talking about?” I said avoiding eye contact, knowing quite well that he'd get to the bottom of this.

“You haven’t been home for days.”

“I’ve been busy.”

“Doing what?”

“Working.”

“Where?”

“The hospital.”

“Doing what?”

“I don’t know... work.”

“Well now that you’re done maybe you should call Lillie. He came by here a few days ago, angry enough to look constipated.”

“No... I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

“Still, you should check up on him. He didn’t even stop to say ‘hello’ to me, and you know how good he is about that sort of thing.”

“Lillie and I aren’t in the best of relations right now,” I said, giving into the inevitable so that Tim would stop interrogating me.

“Why not?”

“Because he didn’t approve of a few of my choices.”

“What did you do?” Tim asked, seeing through my bullshit.

“Nothing,” I replied, believing it for a moment myself. “I just behaved poorly at a club and ended up in the hospital,” I said, trying to make it sound perfectly innocent.

“And that’s nothing? What happened?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Well then what’s the last thing you do remember?” Tim asked, starting to let worry sneak into his voice replacing the previous disgruntled curiosity.

“Dropping a few pills into a puddle of cum on my tongue,” I answered, after a long silence.

“But you hate to swallow!” Tim gasped, now very concerned.

“Yeah, I know.”

“Has it really gotten that bad?” he asked, in reference to his previous knowledge of my once minute drug use.

“No... I don’t know. Maybe... Lillie seems to think so but I think he’s exaggerating,” I said, looking at Tim’s dirty old shoes, with holes at the tips to give his toes air.

“Well if it’s bad enough to put you in the hospital, then maybe Lillie’s right.”

“Look, Tim, I don’t need another lecture right now, so if you’d just move and let me go to bed I won’t bother you with any more of my issues,” I said, frustrated and hurt that everyone seemed to side against me. I moved forward, sulking and feeling sorry for myself, but Tim lifted up his hand to stop me. I came to a halt, looking down at his hand that accidentally pressed up against my tit when I’d tried to walk past him.

“Joan, I’m not going to lecture you. I don’t know what’s happened, so I’m not going to try and tell you what I think. If you need to be alone that’s fine, but if you want to talk to someone I’ll be here,” he said, lowering his voice, and giving me a sincere and compassionate look. My chin twitched and my brows sank. My cheeks pulled up and my eyes flooded as I started to cry. I didn’t care about being tough anymore. I didn’t want to pretend that I wasn’t hurt or that it didn’t matter, because to me nothing mattered more. All

I wanted was that comfort you can only get from your friends. And fortunately I had Tim by my side. He took me onto his shoulder and held me close while we walked over to his dumpster. As we arrived he kicked aside a few cans of half eaten goods and fluffed up part of his sleeping bag for me to sit on.

“It’ll be ok Joan, it’s not like you to give up.”

“I know... I’m not giving up. I’m just scared,” I sobbed, watching a rat run under the dumpster.

“What are you scared of?”

“Of being alone,” I blubbered, my reaction having brooded in my attempts to cork it. “Lillie, Dawn, and April said that they wouldn’t talk to me again until I’m sober but I don’t think I can do it alone,” I said between sniffles and moans, nudging away a used condom with a straw

“I’m so sorry Joan. But you know that they’re just doing it because they love you so much.”

“I know, but it hurts. I just wish that they’d forgive and forget. I don’t want to have to win back their affection.”

“Oh honey, you won’t have to win back their affection. You just have to avoid their disapproval. Normally if they didn’t accept you for who you are I’d say ‘fuck em’, but under the circumstances I can see where they’re coming from,” he said, starting to go off into his own thoughts and ignore me a little. I gave a glance up, waiting for him to stop talking, so I could tell him to stop talking. “I mean maybe if you hadn’t done so many stupid things before, they’d be a little more understanding, but then again...”

“Tim!” I cried, putting aside my self-pity to take it out on someone else. “This isn’t the time to be talking about how stupid I am! You need to be telling me some of the good things, so that I build up my confidence and pull

through!” I yelled, guiding him through the ways to make me feel better. He snapped his head back in surprise, wondered where I was coming from and realized what an ass he had been, all without saying a word.

“Ok!” he exclaimed, his voice squeaking as he looked up, thinking of my better qualities. “Well you’re smart, charming... uh, you... you always help someone if they need it, you’re funny, insightful, a good tipper... you’re kind of a slut, but that’s only cause you want to find love so bad,” he said, rubbing my side with his hand while I nestled my head back into his shoulder. I wiped my nose clean with my forearm and then cleaned that off with part of a pizza box. I looked up adoringly at him and smiled.

“Thank you,” I said, staring into his big blue eyes encircled by his dirt dusted-face.

“Am I interrupting something?” Mark (Tim’s boyfriend) asked, leaning back on his left hip. His hand resting on his pant line, with a grin spread from ear to ear. I jumped up and threw my arms around him. He laughed and staggered back until we hit the brick wall behind him. I got a few flashes of our drunken nights in gay bars; chasing guys out of boredom and a dissolving adrenaline high. He was Lillie’s only competition for the prime feminine figure in my life, outdoing even myself.

“It’s good to see you too!” he cried, as I finally released my kung fu grip of him.

“Yeah, great to see you,” I said, wiping away the remains of a few tears, clinging to my cheek. My eyes fell down to his faded white leather cowboy boots lined with silver and extra long tassels. His bone tight jeans clung to his chicken legs and a mock sailor’s shirt hugged his fit upper body. He even dared to wear a complementary white scarf .

“Awww, why so sad?” he asked, making a puppydog face while sliding his hand onto the side of my hip.

“My friends walked out on me,” I replied, bringing my hands to a rest on his shoulders. His square jaw—which lumped on the sides with muscle—clenched, and he contemplated how to react.

“Those sons a bitches! I want blood!” he screeched playfully, looking over at a chuckling Tim. “Gonna be ok, or do I have to make them come crawling back?”

“No, I’ll be fine, thanks.”

“Well then, out of my way bitch!” he cried, tossing me aside and leaping open mouthed towards Tim. They had their little kissing session while I watched, waiting for one of them to remember that I was there.

“Did you want to join in?” Mark asked, raising his right eyebrow and snapping his teeth together.

“No, that’s quite alright. Besides I have to be getting home.”

“Way to rub it in,” he said, his hand slinking down to play with Tim’s crotch.

“If you want to stay at my place you can. I already offered Tim.”

“Funny, he never mentioned it to me. Guess it must have slipped his mind,” he exclaimed, tickling Tim’s side while leaning, bug-eyed, towards him.

“We appreciate the offer, but we kindly have to decline,” Tim said, fending off Mark’s barrage of play.

“We do not! Anywhere’s better than ‘the sleeping bag next to the dumpster!’” Mark stated with high enthusiasm. “Tim I don’t want to be stuck out here any longer! I’m sick of having people look over at us when I’m giving you head. It’s creepy!”

“Remember the stories Lillie told us Mark?” Tim whispered, giving Mark a look as though he should know better than to question him. Mark appeared offended at first but then he opened his mouth wide and shut it just as quickly. My face shook away its cut and paste emotions to leave a raw reflection of the past. I sniffled once and looked about, trying to focus on something other than the trash surrounding me.

“Oh my God Joan... I’m so sorry,” Mark whimpered, looking wounded. I mustered the best smile I could given mention of the burglary—just one check on a long list of misfortunes, drowned out by the sorrowful life lived ever after. But Mark, having noticed my dismay, quickly picked up his spirits once more. “I mean not to insult your decorating preferences, but I’d sooner sleep in a dead cow than in that shit hole.”

“Me too. But I was thinking that maybe I’d do some redecorating,” I said, smirking and tucking away the painful memories he had brought about.

“Great! It must be your lucky day because we can help you!” Mark squealed, lightly clapping his hands together after picking a piece of gum off of the side of the dumpster, and plopping it in his mouth.

Chapter 6

“So what are you here for?” a pale and scrawny man asked, as he slid a few donuts into his pockets.

“Drugs,” I replied, making a disgusted face when he licked some filling off of his fingers. He gave me a full-toothed, piano key smile, in response and nodded his head.

“What kind of drugs?”

“All kinds,” I replied, scanning the room, hoping that the meeting would begin soon.

“I used to have a problem with drugs myself, but ever since I got promoted, my health insurance covers it!” he exclaimed, pausing briefly afterwards, anticipating laughter. I looked at him as though I’d stumbled in on my parents practicing bondage. I didn’t really get his joke but as his smile started to fade I cracked one, just to keep him from getting upset.

“Alright everyone! If you would please take a seat we can begin!” The ringleader yelled above the mindless chatter, echoing off the walls of the poorly lit, damp, gymnasium. People scattered about like cockroaches, trying to find vacant chairs. I pulled one towards me, began to sit down and then yanked it under me with my leg. After a few minutes of commotion, the crowd settled and the man sitting in a chair, under the basketball net, began his talk.

“I’d like to start by saying how happy I am with the wonderful turnout we’ve gotten today,” he stated, holding for a light flutter of applause. I looked around at the people next to me giving their best ‘golf clap’ and did so myself, somewhat confused as to why. “I see that many of the people who have attended previously are still with us and I’m happy to see that. Also there are many new faces here today, and I hope that you all manage to overcome whatever problems have brought you here,” he said with a smile that looked like a banana, beaten into his skull. “Well, now that that’s out of the way; let’s go around and have someone tell us a little about themselves and what brings them here.”

There was an awkward pause that followed the notion of addressing the crowd. I avoided eye contact with the head honcho, scratching off some of my exposed toenail paint instead. Eventually someone who was comfortable with speaking raised his hand. He stood up, rubbing the back of his neck, and began his address.

“Ok, well my name’s Craig and I’m here because I have a drug addiction,” Craig muttered, setting the bar for the rest of us to speak. He opened his mouth like he was going to say something again, but sat down after realizing that it wasn’t necessary.

“Thank you for sharing Craig,” the rehab tsar bellowed, his squirrelly voice gaining substance as it echoed off the hollow gymnasium. “Who would like to go next?”

A middle-aged man, wearing bifocals twitched his hand as it rose into the air. It bobbed around, like a cork in water, until he stood up. His shoulders drooped down and his comb over slid forward as he pushed his glasses off of the tip of his nose. “I’m Jerry. I’m here because I have a problem with narcotics,” he said, his voice sinking as he said ‘narcotics.’ “I’m here because if I don’t stop soon I might lose my job... so I came here,”

he whined, dropping back into his seat, to stare at the floor. I rolled my eyes and lightly tapped my finger nails against the metal leg of the chair I sat in. After Jerry had finished, a few more hands shot up, and from then on no one was afraid to share. Although what they said and what I heard were two very different things.

“I’m Cody and I’m narcissistic.”

“My name’s Lynn and I’m a nymphomaniac.”

“I’m addicted to picking my nose.”

“I’m gay and I hope the guy across from me notices.”

“I’m too depressed.”

“I’m too happy.”

Then after the alcoholic mother of nine sat down weeping, all eyes came to focus on me. I didn’t notice at first, as I was too busy pulling on a string unraveling from my partially exposed pink panties. When I did look up, I snapped the string off and shoved it in my pocket to play with later. Someone coughed, as though to imply that I should say something but I hadn’t been paying attention and was rather lost as to what the premise was.

“Does anyone else have anything to share?” The ringleader inquired, following a long and awkward silence. I shifted my weight and leaned forward in my chair.

“Do I have to stand up?” I asked, looking at the person next to me who I assumed had been listening. She shook her head and I leaned back into my chair, before I began to speak. “My name’s Joan, and I have a drug problem,” I stated frankly, in a monotone voice. After my echo faded, the

crowd started a brief clap. I gave a confused frown while glancing from side to side seeing people eying me admirably.

“Thank you for sharing, Joan. I hope that we can be of some help in your journey to quit,” The wizard of rehab said, as the clapping drew to a close. “Now that we’ve all been acquainted, does anyone have a success story they’d like to share with the group?” Another patsy strolled into the spotlight and my attention slipped once more. I remembered sitting at my kitchen table with Tim and Mark, who had made a conscious effort not to touch a thing in my house. We had gathered together to brainstorm my new life—attending this group being a direct result of which.

I pulled out an old newspaper and a black felt pen that I had stolen from the hospital. I started writing out a column of numbers below the title do’s and don’ts. When I finished, I looked up at Tim who was poking away a dead cockroach (drenched in coffee) with a straw. Mark had wondered off somewhere and I had no idea where until I heard horrific shrieks come from my bathroom. Tim looked up worried that something had gone wrong, but calmed down when he noticed me laughing.

“What the fuck happened in there!” Mark cried, leaping out of my bathroom and kicking the door shut behind him. He breathed in deeply for a few moments, as though he were on the verge on tears. He swallowed hard, and composed himself enough to walk over to us.

“Have a hairball?” I asked, watching Mark continue to gag.

“That’s not funny! You need to put up biohazard signs or something! I mean I think I’m scarred for life now!”

“Is it really that bad?” Tim asked, wrapping his arm around Mark’s waist.

“If you wanna go look, fine, but I don’t want to speak of it ever again,” Mark said, calming down and drifting into shock as his face lost some of its color.

“Oh, don’t be so melodramatic!” I yelled, pushing a chair towards him with my foot. It bumped into his crotch and he sneered at me before sitting down.

“What do you want to make this list for anyway?” Mark asked.

“Because I feel like I need to have something concrete; something written down so that I can’t change the rules or go back on what I’ve decided.”

“And we’re gonna help her stick with the plan,” Tim said, answering Mark’s next question.

“Ok, so obviously no illicit substances of any sort...actually let’s just say no drugs all together,” I muttered, thinking aloud.

“Even alcohol?” Mark gasped. I paused for a moment and looked back into my conscience.

“Even alcohol... at first,” I stated, regretting it as the words came out of my mouth. I wrote it down and flinched lightly after I pulled the pen away to read it.

“Are you going to go to rehab?” Tim asked, smelling an old egg roll that was on my table.

“Why would I want to go to rehab?”

“Because you have an addiction...or you use too often, in any case.”

“Still, I think rehab’s a little extreme considering the circumstances.”

“Maybe, but if you don’t do that, you should at least go to a support group. Mark went a few times when he was younger, didn’t you honey?” Tim asked, leaning back to look at Mark who had lost interest in the conversation and begun biting his nails.

“Uh yeah... I went a few times. But I found it kind of hard to put up with; some of the people they get in those things are just too creepy to be around. Besides why would I want to attend seminars that persuade me to give up being gay? It’s the definitive quality that sets me apart from all the other drifter hobos!” he exclaimed, redirecting his attention to focus on picking lint from his exposed belly button.

“So would you be willing to try one of those Joan?”

“I just don’t see the need. I mean why should I sit around with a bunch of other losers, like myself, to try and draw sympathy? They obviously don’t have a clue either; otherwise they wouldn’t be there to begin with.”

“That’s not the point. You go for support and to learn from other people’s mistakes before you make them yourself. That and they usually have free donuts and coffee.”

“Yeah that’s true. We actually abused that for a while when we were fresh on the street,” Mark chirped, always in a good mood when discussing free food.

“Oh fuck; I’m gonna have to get a job aren’t I?” I whined, slumping down into my chair.

“Aw, poor baby!” Mark cried, rubbing his hands under his eyes. “We have a nice tit here for you to make you feel all better!” he said, grabbing one of Tim’s nipples. Tim pulled away sharply and Mark leaned forward a little, almost losing his balance in his chair.

“Seriously, what am I going to do?”

They both made dumbstruck faces, portraying that they didn't have a clue either. "We're a couple of bums Joan; do you really think it's a good idea to ask us for career advice?"

"I guess not. But I need some ideas."

"You could always get a job where April works...that is unless you're trying to steer clear of her right now," Mark suggested, changing his mind mid-sentence to accommodate the various people trying to avoid me.

"No, I want to see April; she just doesn't want to see me," I replied, starting to sadden when I thought of her. But I quickly swallowed my feelings and returned to the task at hand. "I could do something with computers."

"Yeah, or you could work at Starbucks," Tim said, countering my initial proposal with something a little more realistic.

"I'm gonna try and avoid the food industry, but I would like to work at a clothing store selling things!" I exclaimed, suddenly excited about work.

"Oh! I know this really funky place downtown that you would be perfect for!" Mark squealed. "I can take you there tomorrow if you'd like."

"Ok," I said, writing in 'work' on my 'to do' list.

After a long series of debates and sidetracked conversations to talk about oral sex, we managed to pump out pretty much nothing at all. There was some name-calling, a tickle fight and an escape to the park to avoid the smell of my bathroom, but in the end we did have one good idea on my list. Number one; get a job.

"I feel like a slut," I told Mark, as he picked at his exposed nipple through his fish net shirt. My fake fur (not warm, just for show) coat, that I had lent him, swayed back and forth in the breeze coming from behind us. It was one of those summer days where you're pleased it's not cold, but can't

stop bitching about the heat. Of course neither of us had bothered to check the forecast and were left helpless to the seasons change.

“That’s good, they like sluts here,” he said, putting on shiny, lightly tinted, purple, lip balm.

“Don’t get anything on my stuff Mark, I can’t afford to buy new clothes.”

“Oh stop bitching! I won’t get anything on your precious ‘stuff’!” he exclaimed, rolling his eyes and moving his hands with his hips, lightly clenching a wallet sized bag between his thumb and his index finger. “Now remember, just be yourself. I’ve come in here a lot and if it’s one thing they don’t like it’s a phony! Also, if they know a few things about you that you kinda wish they didn’t, it’s ok,” he said, in a giddy voice, as he sped up and pushed past a hot dog vendor.

“What kind of place is this anyway?” I asked, trying to keep up with him. “And how can you walk so quickly in a skirt?”

“Cause I have three legs!”

“Funny; But again, what kind of place is this?”

“You’ll find out soon enough Miss Impatient! Just do what I told you and you’ll be fine. It’s not like they get many of your kind in these parts! Although they should,” Mark said, his heels clip clopping under the cabs that rushed past us.

“Slow the fuck down Mark! What’s your hurry anyway?”

“You said we could ‘use’ your apartment while you were gone, so I want to hurry home and give my Tim the lovin’ he deserves! That, and while I’m looking this good, I can make a few bucks before I get there!” Mark yelled, trying to drown out the near by construction work. I never knew how to react to Mark’s confessions of prostitution, particularly when he was

wearing my clothes. But I knew the kind of life he led growing up. I knew that nothing I had experienced could compare to what he'd been through and that any lecture I could give would reflect poorly on me, not him.

“Why don't you just get a job?” I asked, playfully. Keeping in mind how touchy he could be if anybody talked down about his lifestyle.

“Same reason you wouldn't until now; if you just wanna get by you don't really need a job!”

“So then why am I getting one? I don't need to buy a new couch or live by Ikea,” I asked/stated, now keeping pace with Mark.

“Don't ask me. But if I had to venture a guess I'd say it's cause you need something constructive to keep your sweet tooth off the streets,” he said, making a left and slowing down as we approached a large store covered in neon lights.

“This sucks,” I moaned, pouting and pushing my bottom lip up, causing my face to wrinkle.

“This is the bed you made sweetie! And as everybody knows, digging your own grave can only be an occupation for so long!” he exclaimed, stopping in front of some bright pink, swinging doors. “And now without further adieu, the Whore House!” he cried, pushing in the doors and holding them for me while I walked, awe struck, inside.

“Oh my God Mark! It's perfect!” I said, stuttering and fumbling with the words in my mouth. My eyes shot back and forth from vibrating panties to edible underwear. I jumped with glee when I saw the leather section. My mouth watered as I gazed upon the in store bar, and I practically fainted when I saw their shoe display. I leaned, weepy eyed, on to Mark's shoulder and we shared a euphoric fashion moment.

“And the discount’s thirty percent,” he sobbed, as we both started crying with joy. We got a few weird looks from people, but we didn’t care. No amount of embarrassment can drown out the worth of a good discount. After a few moments a woman in a sleeveless purple, cotton shirt and light pink, silk, pajama bottoms, walked over to us.

“Are you Joan?” she asked abruptly, brushing back her gorgeous red hair with one hand and touching my arm with the other.

“Yes; sorry I got so emotional. I’ll shut up now,” I said, pulling myself together.

“Well I’m Stacy, and I’ll be interviewing you for the job.”

“Oh! Hi, it’s a pleasure to meet you,” I exclaimed, enthused to meet my (possible) future employer. She had that movie star beauty to her and you could tell she knew it. Her thick hair fell to the middle of her back and I caught a glimpse of her sexy, firm, stomach. Her sharp eyebrows gave her a distinguished classic look that radiated from her sleek beautiful features. I was amazed by her looks at first. But her blatantly bold nature shook away any possible attraction.

“Likewise. And you are?” she said, looking disapprovingly at Mark.

“Oh, I’m just someone to give her a pep talk. I’ll be leaving now though, so I’ll see you later sweetie,” Mark said, leaning over and kissing me once on each cheek. After he left Stacy and I walked upstairs to an office for the interview. It was much more formal than the rest of the store, and if it weren’t for a poster sized, fifties, porno-magazine-cover hanging on the wall it wouldn’t have fit in at all.

“So, my secretary told me that you used to be a man,” Stacy stated bluntly, sitting down in her large, leather, office chair; gesturing for me to sit in a scruffy seat in front of her desk.

“And who told your secretary that?” I asked, cautiously. Now worried, and confused. Nobody says I used to be a man and nobody I knew would say that, which meant it had to be her interpretation, and a wrong one at that.

“Whoever it was that called in to arrange your interview told me.”

“Oh,” I said under my breath, thinking of Mark.

“Don’t worry I’m not going to tell anyone. It’s just that you should know it’s because of that fact that you got this interview. We try and keep a diverse cast of people working here, and in doing so appeal to our wide variety of customers,” she said, leaning back into her chair and putting her bare feet up on her desk. I could see a few Chinese symbols tattooed on her leg but she started talking again and drew my attention away from them. “I should also inform you that I am aware of your past drug abuse. Now I don’t have a problem with this, but under no circumstances are you to use while working here. Whatever you do outside of the premises is your own business, but when you’re here I expect you to be sober and alert.”

“That’s not a problem. I don’t plan on using again.”

“Good. Other than a few ground rules, that I’ll fill you in on later, there really isn’t much to it. You sell clothes and I make money, simple as simple,” she stated, tapping a penis pencil on a notepad. “Do you have any questions?”

“Don’t you want to see my résumé?” I asked, some what bewildered as to whether or not I had already gotten the job, and if so why.

“No, I don’t need to. You meet all of my qualifications and if I end up not liking you, you can always be replaced.”

“So, does that mean I get the job?”

“Yes. You start on Tuesday,” she said, sternly. “This is a pamphlet that will fill you in on starting pay, store policy, and a few other ‘need to knows’ before you begin. Any questions you have that it doesn’t provide I’ll be more than happy to answer for you when you start.”

“Wow, thank you so much,” I said standing up and shaking her hand. I tried to hold a polite smile but the truth was something felt off. I could tell she didn’t like me, but if that were the case why would she hire me?

“Not a problem. Just be here on time and we’ll get along fine,” she said, shaking my hand as she walked me through the bead door of her office.

“No offense, but I don’t think you’re gonna be able to quit cold turkey Joan,” Tim stated, picking out some dirt from under his nails while watching Mark slip back into his clothes. He looked embarrassed, which surprised me because I wouldn’t have thought he could be.

“Again, I’m so sorry Joan,” he exclaimed, putting on his black, fish net, shirt.

“It’s not a problem Mark. I assumed that you two would be doing something of the sort with the apartment to yourselves.”

“Still, I got apple sauce all over your floor,” he said, in reference to my walking in on Tim licking apple sauce off of Marks genitals. I had given a loud shriek that sent him running for my bathroom, which, in turn, made him give a loud shriek and come running back.

“Really I don’t care Mark. It’s ok,” I said, turning my attention away from him, and directing it towards Tim’s comment that I ‘wouldn’t be able to quite cold turkey.’ “Why not?”

“I just think that if you sit around here all day and do nothing, the cravings will drive you insane. If you do something to keep you busy however you may be able to beat it.”

“Like what?”

“I say counter one addiction with another. Why not get in shape?”

I paused and contemplated the idea of being healthy for a moment. “I don’t think I have the energy,” I said hesitantly.

“It’s just a suggestion. But I think it would be good for you.”

“I’ll write it, but it doesn’t mean that I have to do it,” I mumbled, scribbling down ‘get in shape’ on my list.

“Well if you get to choose which ones you do, what the hell’s the point of the list?” Mark asked, finishing up some uneaten applesauce.

The gym smelt like a tomb. The damp sweat soaked into the equipment over the years, the B.O. of people working out all around me, the cleaning spray to hose down the equipment; dirty towels, Gatorade, Powerbars, gym bags, old socks, and crusty vomit from the super models who’d retire to the bathroom to shove a finger down their throats. Imagine an infinite pallet of the most vile odors conceivable, all masked by the notion of being healthy; that and really good ventilation.

I was awestruck. Standing in what seemed like a house of mirrors, filled with thin, fit, young, perfect, beautiful people; I felt truly worthless. The motors of the treadmills created the highway of fitness; with off ramps leading to steroid road, Pretty Boy Ave, and athlete junction. I wasn’t just unfit; I was bitter, filled with spite, and jealous as all hell. Being in there made me want to run for hours just to prove I was worthy. This was the kind of incentive I needed.

“What else?” I asked, tapping a penis pencil that I had gotten from work, on my list.

“How many times are we going to have to keep meeting? I mean can’t we just come up with this stuff in one sitting?” Mark said, lying with his head over the side of my couch, playing upside-down-solitaire.

“Maybe we’d be able to if you’d focus for once. And besides, do you have anything better to do?”

“Ok, I’ll pay attention; but only if this is the last time we do this. I’m getting restless,” Mark said, sitting up and kicking the cards aside.

“Actually Joan; I’ve changed my mind; I can’t clean your bathroom,” Tim whined, exiting my washroom, with a troubled face, clenching a sponge.

“I never said you had to. You offered, remember?”

“I know, I thought I could do it... But it’s just too much.”

“Woah, sitting up that fast made me dizzy,” Mark said, clenching the torn up arm of my crappy old couch.

“I guess I’ll just have to hire someone when I can afford it,” I stated blankly to whoever would listen.

“How about if you redecorate?” Mark suggested, standing up and wobbling into my side table.

“How am I supposed to pay for it?”

“Well you don’t have to do it right now. Just put it as something to do later on.”

“I don’t know if a cleaning crew would work on that. There are dead roaches in there Joan! The fucking things can survive atomic blasts and

they're dead in your bathroom!" Tim exclaimed, opening his eyes wide and flailing his arms about. I opened my mouth to reply but Mark said something again and I gave up on trying to pay attention to both of them.

"On the other hand we could just start small. Like painting stuff or something," Mark mumbled, eyeing my walls.

"I know there are special crews that come in to clean up corpses... but I don't know how we'd go about contacting them... and even then they'd probably be hesitant."

"Is that a condom stapled to your ceiling?" Mark gasped, while imagining what paint color to use.

"Yes," I muttered, touching my forehead and rolling my eyes.

"Why's it there?"

"Incase of an emergency."

"God Joan, it's amazing you haven't been evicted yet," Mark groaned, assessing the overwhelming damage my apartment had endured.

"I have my mother to thank for that... I figure it's her moral justification for avoiding me completely since the operation," I sighed, fighting off nostalgia along with any remnants of family baggage.

"Another possibility would be that Mark and I could just round up some of the guys from the mall dumpsters or the train and see if they'd be interested; those guys are desperate, and usually on something, so I think they could do a good job," Tim said, sitting down beside me, at the kitchen table.

"I think a cleaning service will be sufficient."

"How long has it been there?" Mark asked, reaching up to try and poke the condom.

“I don’t know... a year.”

“Well someone hasn’t been getting laid very often,” Mark said giggling.

“Can we please just focus on the list?”

“Well I agree with Mark then; we definitely have to do some work on this place.”

“I don’t have time right now.”

“We can do it. We don’t have anything but time,” Mark said, sitting down at the table with Tim and me.

“Fine, just make sure you don’t lock me out,” I mumbled, looking down at my list, now covered in dots from my pencil tapping.

“Great! We can get started tomorrow. You’d be surprised what two gay guys can pull out of nothing and make look good,” Mark said, stereotyping himself with every word.

“Sure... So, other than the decorating, which you two will take care of, what do I need to do?” I asked, trying to get both of them to focus. We all thought for a few moments and stared blankly forward.

“Oh!” Mark cried, after I had just fallen asleep. “Why don’t you make amends? They always have people doing that in AA.”

“Who am I supposed to make amends with?” I asked, as both Mark and Tim gave me looks implying that I should know better than to say such stupid things.

“Fine... then what?” I said, writing down make amends on my list.

“Do you want to get into a relationship or are you still hoping that ‘they’ll’ come around?” Tim asked, in reference to the love of my life.

“I don’t know,” I sighed, looking into my lap. “Obviously it’s become a little more complicated due to recent events. But I’m not sure if I could date anybody right now.”

“Ok,” Both Tim and Mark said with a synchronized compassion. The full extent of my pitfalls with the ‘love of my life’ was unbeknownst to them; I had neither the heart nor the will to inform others, or the strength to accept it myself. The very mention of my past love was enough to bring me to tears.

“So yeah...make amends huh?” I exclaimed, looking at my list again. Number three, make amends.

“I’m sorry who are you again?” some jackass that I had wronged at one point asked, as I made my apologetic rounds.

“Joa...John. We went to school together,” I said, trying to talk as deeply as possible.

“And why are you calling?”

“Because I was kind of an ass in high school and I wanted to say I’m sorry.”

“No, I meant what happened to make you call and say you’re sorry; not why you’re telling me your calling,” the person said, aggravated and growing more and more impatient.

“I really don’t think that’s important right now. I’m just trying to apologize.”

“I’m guessing that you’re probably going through AA, or maybe you just broke up with someone and have come to realize just how much of a dick you are.”

“You’re missing the point, this isn’t about me.”

“Of course it is! Do you think I need closure?”

“No, it’s just,” I said, being cut off mid sentence.

“Just what? Did you really think that by calling me out of the blue because you have some problems, that I’d appreciate your efforts and commend you on being a good person? I mean come on! That’s just adding insult to injury.”

“Well what about you! Attacking me every chance you get just because I’m opening myself up, trying to apologize!” I yelled, losing my cool and doing the opposite of what I’d called for.

“Now you’re insulting me? What the fuck kind of apology is this?”

“You won’t let me apologize you asshole!”

“Why should I? If you were really sincere about this you’d grin and bear it! But no! You’re just calling so you can feel better about yourself!”

“You’re fucking right I am!” I screamed, losing my fake manly voice. “I don’t care about what I did to you! You probably deserved it, and to tell you the truth I don’t even remember who the fuck you are or what I did!”

“Then how the hell did you expect to say you’re sorry?”

“By being civil! But you had to get to the bottom of things! You couldn’t have just said ‘ok, I forgive you, have a nice life!’ You had to treat me like I’m a Goddamn telemarketer!”

“Fuck you!”

“Fuck you!” I shouted, hanging up the phone and falling back into my chair.

“Excuse me miss?” a janitor said, poking me with his broomstick. I woke up, snorting as I did so and reared my head back trying to remember

where I was and what was happening. Looking around the room to see a bunch of folded up chairs stacked in the corner, a few half eaten donuts and empty styrofoam coffee cups spread across the floor, I realized I was still in the support group.

“Where is everybody?” I asked, yawning and looking around the vacant gymnasium.

“They left about fifteen minutes ago; said that if you were that tired they might as well let you sleep.”

“That’s nice,” I exclaimed, stretching out my arms and pulling my purse strap over my shoulder.

“But now I’m gonna have to ask you to leave... sorry,” he said, leaning on his broom. I chuckled lightly, stood up and walked out. It’s easy to wear out your welcome when you sleep through it.

Chapter 7

“This should help you guys out,” I said, signing the bottom of a check and handing it to Tim. For their decorating odyssey Mark and Tim had set up shop and encircled me with weird furniture, odd coloring and other miscellaneous tidbits. I didn’t know where they were going with it but I’d promised not to horn in, so long as they left my closet alone.

“Thanks Joan, this will be more than enough to get what we need,” Tim stated warmly, folding the check in half and stuffing it in his shirt pocket. He then resumed reading a magazine and nibbling his food. Mark lay in the other room, still at work while Tim and I took a much needed break to relinquish our energy-bound proceedings.

“No, thank you for helping me out,” I said, changing the tone to try and portray how grateful I was.

“No problem, we had the time and Mark needed a pet project,” he replied, failing to pick up on my efforts to be sincere.

“No, not with the apartment... I mean not just the apartment. Thank you for being so supportive throughout this whole ordeal. I really owe you, and Mark as well.”

“My ears are burning,” Mark yelled, still in the other room.

“You’re welcome. I know you’d have done the same for me,” he replied, somewhat comically as the situation was a little sappy. “Have you thought at all about talking to your friends again?”

“Yeah... but I don’t think I’m ready yet. Something tells me that they’ll need a little more time than I’d normally be willing to give.”

“That’s fair. But it’ll be interesting to see their reactions when they see how well you’re doing,” Tim exclaimed, adjusting himself in his seat. A moment later we heard Mark give out a high-pitched shriek. Tim and I both reared our heads to the side, waiting for something to happen. We could hear Mark start crying before he ran out of my room, flailing his arms about. He headed for the kitchen sink, as quickly as he could, reeking of fermented pickle juice.

“Why did you open that jar?” I asked, chuckling while he scrubbed his arms hard enough to peel the skin off.

“Why did you keep that?” he screamed, glaring at me, horrified from discovering my pickled private parts.

“I don’t know...sentimental value?”

“That’s sick! I feel so violated!”

“Well, you shouldn’t have been snooping around like that. You’re just bound to stumble across someone’s amputated genitals.”

Tim gave a sigh of relief as he caught on to what we were talking about.

“It’s not funny!” Mark yelled, scowling. He cleaned himself off as best he could and then stormed off to continue his painting. Tim and I finished lunch, only somewhat offset by the odor of old penis/pickle juice.

“Why did you keep it Joan?” Tim asked as he and Mark prepared to leave later that day. He gave me a confused look masking an astute observation. He had always been different when it came to my sex-change—more understanding, forgiving and sympathetic. Something I couldn’t credit

my other friends with, save for Dawn. “It just makes me wonder if you regret it.”

“Regret what?” I asked, playing dumb once again. I didn’t have it in me to go over it, not even with Tim.

“The operation, you know the jar,” he said in a cautious voice. I didn’t respond and looked down the hall, making sure that Mark couldn’t hear what was being discussed. “I mean I know that you say ‘it’s the best thing you’ve ever done,’ but then again things haven’t turned out exactly as you planned.”

“Yeah... it was worth it; of course it was,” I muttered, slowly closing the door so that I wouldn’t have to talk about it any more. I stood at my door watching the peephole, without seeing through it. I suddenly felt hurt, but it wasn’t Tim’s comment. I wanted desperately to see my friends again. More than that I wanted to feel normal, to be done with all the bullshit I had tried so hard to hide. But I knew my work wasn’t over and all that remained now was sticking to the plan.

I turned around slowly as I listened to Tim and Mark walk down the stairs. I stared blankly forward, staggering into my kitchen to collapse on a chair. I sucked in air to counteract the tears and then sort of sobbed back to normal breath. I thought of what a mess everything had become and how maybe I hadn’t really solved anything. Then I told myself I was stupid, that I had done the right thing. But even after my feelings of doubt and absurdity subsided, the thought of April lingered.

Chapter 8

When you're locked inside—and all you can think about is why—you wish you'd shelled out the few extra bucks for cable. It was raining outside. That engulfing blue-grey that made you forget the sun ever shone. Or maybe that was just the mood I was in. I'd walk to my fridge to see the fat free yogurt, veggie burgers, tofu and just about everything else you could insulate your house with. I'd flip through magazines, stopping to search for any visible flaws on the models, if only to give myself hope. But most of all I paced. When you're analytically neurotic, shutting your mind up is a godsend.

I thought of Dawn: the inescapable spawn of one part ballerina ovary and one part Park Avenue cumshot; all shaken up and poured into a world built for his disposal. I missed him.

I thought of April: the curly haired blond lesbian, dressed in Gucci that her beauty afforded her. The yoga practicing, all organic, save the world, dike rocking to Melissa Ferrick, epitome of my desire.

I even thought of Lillie: his betrayal second to my benevolent affections for him; the kind of closeness that most people lose in attempting a relationship.

I caught eye of my alarm clock's wagging tail, telling me that the hour was up. I fell into the couch, and let my neck relax. I stared at the ceiling wondering how long I'd be bored wondering how long I'd be bored.

But then an idea came to me; something branching off from the Chanel girl wearing a corset. I remembered that Lillie had a show in just about an hour and that, before my little mishap, I had been invited. I wanted desperately to go. To tell him that everything was better now and we could go back to the way things used to be. But I knew it was too soon and the last thing I wanted was to spoil my chance at ever winning him back. Of course, that wouldn't stop me from going.

I slapped on my big yellow rain boots and a turquoise overcoat. My violet, transparent umbrella, that was too small to stop most of the rain, hung from my pocket. I swiped up my keys and closed the door. I had dressed as inconspicuously as time would allow. Anywhere else I'd have looked like a Fruit Roll-Up, but where I was headed I was playing it low key.

I stepped outside into the deafening thud of the rain, amplified by my umbrella. People held papers and pizzas over their heads as they made mad dashes for shelter. I skipped along anxiously, already pretending I wasn't afraid. I had enough time to be early, let alone fashionably late, so I decided to walk it. I jumped in puddles, pissing off anyone near me. I hummed singing in the rain, as cliché as it was; anything to keep my mind off of how petrified I was.

When I arrived at the door the tall thin man decked out in fur recognized me and dove into the obligatory 'how are things?' questioning. I gave him a brief overview, without supplying anything ample for him to gossip about or judge me for. I then asked him similar questions and received similar answers. I left him to enter the sedated flash of the blues meets drag setting.

"Actually, Sharon," I said, turning around quickly. He lifted up his chin and posed for my address. "If you could keep it a secret that I'm here I'd

really appreciate it... I want to surprise Lillie,” I stated, giving my worst-best excuse I could come up with.

“Sure thing doll,” he replied, kissing the air and firing me a wink. I smiled gratefully and strode inside, keeping my head tucked down so that no one would notice me. I headed for a secluded little table off to the side, where I knew for a fact there would be no audience participation. But somehow an already drunk group of people I used to get high with spotted me and rushed over.

“Joan!” generic drug buddy 1 cried. “How the fuck are yah?”

“Oh hey,” I muttered, peering over at the still vacant table screaming for my occupancy. “I’m well... you know... things are good.”

“Yeah? Shit, the last time I saw you was at that club like 6 months ago,” he laughed, giving me the impression that he didn’t fully recall the encounter.

“Right,” I fictitiously chuckled, checking every side of me as my former friend, through association and pastime, was being quite loud.

“So who are you here with?” he asked, hiccupping on a bubble of vodka lodged in his throat.

“Oh, I’m...” I stammered, trying to come up with a lie on the spot.

“Hey!” he chimed in, interrupting my efforts. “You know who’s here?”

“Who,” I asked, not wanting to know.

“Dan! Fucking Dan!” he exclaimed, laughing gaily as though I should give a shit that his favorite dealer made parole.

“Oh yeah... how’s he?” I sighed, feeling a nostalgic doom entrap my senses.

“Why don’t you ask him yourself? He’s right over at our table!” he shrieked, practically making a scene. I felt tears billow when I glanced over to see a group of tattooed anorexic junkies huddled together for body heat. They looked up at me and waved me towards them like they were directing traffic. I scowled and looked at the floor, following my companion if only to extinguish the growing unrest he was causing the people around me; who were out on the town for an innocent night of drag.

“What’s up Jen?” one of the people at the table hollered, putting up their hand to give me a firm ghetto hello.

“Actually, it’s Joan,” I said, taking note of their explosive pupils and powdered milk mustaches. I watched their grins widening and contracting, expecting a stream of blood to blast out of their nostrils at any moment. Their teeth were broken with varying color blotches outlining cigarette stains and pulled gold fillings. They could never understand how uncomfortable I was—wedged between my friends and the people who’s coffins were on lay away. There was no decision to make.

“Actually I kind of need to be alone tonight,” I stated, standing tall and walking over to the secluded table. They watched me exit, too high to take offense, and resumed their rowdy behavior. I gave a sigh of relief when the waiter came to my table, giving me a reason to hold back the tears. He wore a leopard-print shrunken cowboy hat and an over-the-top cow design minnie skirt.

“What can I get for yah shug?” he asked in a playfully manifested southern accent.

“May I please have an ice tea?” I said, seeing Lillie in him and consequently being as nice as I could. He gave me a flirtatious order confirmation and made sure to swing his hips as he moved on to the next table. I watched him, acting as a distraction for my gaze as I thought of how

much my friends had done for me. Until now I hadn't realized how sorry I was—or for that matter, how grateful.

The show started and I pleasantly sipped my iced tea thinking happy thoughts. Lillie came on stage and my heart warmed. He looked fabulous. His legs were lined with thick, black, fishnet, stockings. His dress was a deep shimmering blue with an underlining silver gleam that fell to just bellow his butt. He looked like a black-light peacock, confidently strutting in all his majesty. And for once, I could relate. The music grew and I slipped into a fantasy world of indulging in his reality.

When it comes to spreading your virgin legs for the nightlife you can't help but feel overwhelmed by the tough truths of foreign surroundings. A callous, conceited audacity doesn't bode well beyond your mother's teat. Ordering fad food and drinks won't get you anything more than an overpriced meal. And no amount of evidence for or against these things will help you find your niche—only experience will do that. If it weren't for Dawn I never would have survived.

"I swear to fucking God, John: if you resort to that high and mighty bullshit I'm walking," Dawn groaned, having had just about enough of my whining.

Much to my dismay we were sitting front and center at a drag show. I was in that rebellious stage used as a front for conformity. I hated my parents and their money, but never hesitated to take it or follow in their footsteps. I was clinically depressed, cynical and condescending. Looking back I don't recognize or understand who I was—ignorant, arrogant enough for two; a tight-assed, rich kid, sheltered shrew.

"What are you talking about?"

“You always do this, every time something makes you uncomfortable you act like you’re superior so you can get away from it.”

“I think you’ve had too much to drink,” I replied, swirling my wine. Dawn leaned forward and clasped my glass. He glared at me, holding a silence for dramatic effect.

“Look, we’ve known each other long enough to be past this shit. I brought you here because it’s something you need to experience.”

“A drag show is something that needs to be experienced?”

“If it helps you lighten up then yes. All I’m asking is that you stop criticizing, stop bitching and just enjoy the show.”

I opened my mouth to object, but (watching Dawn’s leg move into a position to can me) I swallowed my contradictions. I nodded and rolled my eyes towards the stage where a man dressed as a woman strode elegantly towards me. His grace and confidence captivated a visceral part of me and I felt liberated. In retrospect the impact was obvious, but at that point nothing surprised me more. It’s easy to forget your roots when you’ve outgrown them. That drag show was the first night I met Lillie and the first glimpse of who I would become.

Afterwards I waited, contemplating saying something; maybe complementing the show. But after the drunken drug party stumbled outside, I waited no longer. I decided not to approach Lillie and made my exit instead. I picked up my umbrella and walked steadily for the door, catching eye of Lillie doing the same in the back. Our synchronized departure made me laugh and I held that thought for the lonely walk home.

Chapter 9

“What’s the best blow up doll you have?” a man in his late twenties asked me, as we graced the isles looking for sex toys.

“Well the slut 4000 is a very popular model. But we’ve had a few problems with them popping so I don’t know exactly how reliable they are. Then there are the ones that we have specially made for us. They’re more expensive but we’ve received nothing but rave reviews as of yet,” I said, handing him a deflated one in plastic wrap.

“Do you have any that are blown up?”

“No, we had problems with customers getting too frisky,” I said, as I looked out the corner of my eye to see, my boss, Stacy walking towards me.

“This looks good, where do I pay for it?”

“There are registers downstairs,” I replied, smiling and putting my arms behind my back. I watched the customer walk away and then turned my attention to focus on Stacy who was waiting to have a word with me.

“What’s up?”

“I have to leave early today and I need people to stay late. Can you take a longer shift or do you have to be somewhere?” she asked, her tone implying that my staying was mandatory and I didn’t have anything better to do.

“I guess I could pick up a longer shift,” I stated blankly.

“Great, I appreciate it,” she said, skipping away to hail Satan. I squeezed a nearby blow up doll and growled as I watched Stacy step onto the escalator. I thought about what a bitch she was and why I hated her so much; taking my anger out on the doll in my hand as I did so. I remembered her yelling at me on my first day; telling me that I was ‘lucky to be there’ and she didn’t hire me to ‘talk back.’ I kept quiet, knowing very well that I was likely going to be her new emotional punching bag. Every day since, she would bitch at me for something; if I were too early, if I wasn’t nice to the customers, or maybe too nice. If I swore, told dirty jokes (in the Whore House you’re not allowed to tell dirty jokes!) or even if I checked out the shoppers. I didn’t know why she hated me, but I knew I hated her more.

As Stacy disappeared from sight, I stopped squeezing the blow up doll and pushed the vein bulging out of my head back in. I looked down at the plastic concoction in my hand to see that I had applied so much pressure I’d put a hole in its forehead. I swore for a little while and then took it downstairs to report the mishap. However, in doing so I caught a sight more horrific than anything I’d seen. In shock I stopped, in fear I hid, and in between the racks of skimpy fur clothes I eavesdropped.

“Hey! How was your day?” Stacy asked, wrapping her arms around April and kissing her... around April and kissing her!

“It was great thanks. Are you ready to go?” she replied, moving a hand down to grab Stacy’s ass... Stacy’s ass!

“Yeah, I got someone to take an extra shift,” she said, bringing her hands to a rest on April’s hips. My jaw dropped. I wanted to run up, grab April, shake her and scream, “Are you fucking kidding me? Why in the hell would you date someone like this?” but I couldn’t—I was still in exile from her. I stayed where I was and watched them exit, cuddling lovingly, making me want to puke. Nobody was allowed to touch April, certainly not Stacy.

My pupils dilated and I could feel a cold sensation run through my spine. Want, desire and craving set in. But each was snuffed by the fact that she was with somebody else. I could tell by her smile it was serious. I could see in her eyes she'd forgotten me. After all we'd been through, every miserable night and tortured day, April was happy. And I'd be damned if I was going to be happy for her. The love of my life was vanishing before my eyes.

I kind of sat down/collapsed in-between the clothing displays gripping the punctured blow up doll just enough to keep it from slipping away. I stared blankly forward, pulling my knees up so that I could rest my chin upon them. For a moment I wanted to cry. Then I wanted to be strong, and then I wanted to stop wanting and just let things be, but before I got a chance a customer strolled in between the display and I had to forfeit my hiding place. I trudged back upstairs and fell into one of those standard-issue-office-chairs that gives you just enough satisfaction to keep your ass from falling asleep.

I completely lost my concentration. I went from one absurd thought to another. Be it confronting April or Stacy; taking drugs; eating a carton of ice cream; drinking myself blind... or sex. And then when that filthy little thought came to mind I relaxed and could finally think about whatever dirty fetishes turned me on; whatever I wanted to do for a few hours that would make me cringe for the rest of my life. But after a few minutes I started to lose my sexual need. I panicked, grabbed my coat, and rushed out the door, leaving a popped blow up doll spinning on my recently vacated chair.

Chapter 10

“What’s that smell?” some guy I’d picked up to make me feel better asked, as we walked into my apartment. I tossed my keys onto my newly patched up and refinished couch that Mark and Tim had surprised me with the day before. They had fixed it up by using a light denim cover for the couch, and varying sizes of colored patches sewn on in numerous places. My new tiny side table, that they had fashioned out of Popsicle sticks and then wrapped in string to make it look cool, wobbled every time my door closed. At its side sat my answering machine and a picture of Mark mooning the camera. In front of the couch was a coffee table that they had found by the dumpster and re-painted using whatever was left from a few cans of spray paint.

“It’s my bathroom. Don’t go in there,” I replied, walking into the kitchen and filling a glass of water.

“Whatever,” he said, following close, eagerly waiting to fuck me. “So where’s the bedroom?”

I extended my index finger to point at my door while I drank the water. He started removing his shirt as he walked over to it, giving me a sleazy smile in doing so. I rolled my eyes and put my glass down in the sink. I rewound my memory to a half an hour before when I had approached him out of the blue. After seeing April paired up with Stacy I needed something to focus on other than them. So, keeping in mind the ‘don’ts’ of my list, I decided to find a quick and meaningless fuck to keep me entertained. He

wasn't bad looking but he wasn't good either. He was average height, although still shorter than me. He had brown hair and worked out, but didn't have any definition. I hadn't checked what color his eyes were, as I didn't care enough about him to bother.

"Are you coming?" he shouted from my bedroom. I could hear him messing around with a few things and getting the bed ready. I looked up at my ceiling to see the condom stapled to it, and made a few attempts to get it down. Eventually I managed to grab hold, but it ripped in half when I pulled at it.

"Yeah, just wait a second," I replied in an aggravated voice. I walked slowly over to my bathroom, paused and sucked in a deep breath. I grabbed the doorknob and thrust it forward. Even though I was holding my breath, the smell hit me like a bus. It crept up my nostrils, forcing itself into my brain. I closed my eyes hard and exhaled slowly; just enough to keep the smell out of my nose. I frantically grabbed the cupboard and pulled it open. I knocked over a few things, searching for the condoms. But I couldn't take it, if only for the reminder. I panicked, breathed out fiercely, turned around and got the hell out of there. Slamming the door I fell towards the wall, leaned against it, and gasped for air. I thought about how ridiculous the whole thing had gotten. I had managed to reform my life and pull away from a potential addiction without slipping once, but I couldn't bring myself to clean my washroom.

"Sorry couldn't get the condoms," I said, in a non-sympathetic voice. He was lying on my (now messy) bed stroking his penis; which was still concealed by a pair of tight black underwear. I stopped in the doorway and placed my elbow against the wall. He was tonguing his lips and looking me up and down while muttering something to himself. I rolled my eyes and walked up to him. I didn't shake my hips or try and make myself look sexy.

My mind was already off of April even before I got laid, simply because of what a douche this guy was. He removed his socks and stood up. His bare feet left temporary footprints of crusty mist on the floor, fading as he approached me.

“I’m gonna fuck you so hard,” he said, starting to unbutton my shirt. He leaned in and kissed my neck, exposing me to the view of his back hair. I made a perturbed face when he began licking my jugular; leaving me to examine what I thought of my freshly decorated room. A few new mattresses were now my bed; laid atop a sturdy frame so that when I was jerking off they wouldn’t smack against the wall. My closet had remained untouched as requested, except for some very light yellow paint to cover up the previous gold on its doors. The walls had been repainted as well; now a milky violet, bordered on the top and bottom with a strip of eggshell colored wood. The color scheme reminded me of Wal-Mart around Easter time.

“I’ll do it,” I said coldly, growing impatient after a few moments of him fumbling with my bra strap. He took a step back and persisted smacking his lips together. I undid my bra and let it drop to the floor. My implants bobbed out with my nipples partially concealed by my loose, un-tucked, pink dress shirt. He stepped forward again, after the bra obstacle had been conquered, and started licking my tits top to bottom. He fully extended his tongue, making sure to touch as much as he could. Eventually he nestled down and just sucked, but it took him a few moments of indulgence beforehand. I got a nostalgic flash of me waxing my chest and chuckled. He interpreted it as my being sexually aroused and started fondling the rest of me. The other hand, that wasn’t busy supporting my tit, reached around and squeezed my ass. His fingers strayed from his palm and, even with my pants on, dug into my ass crack. I felt my panties shove up along side his hand, giving me a wedgy.

The momentary pain that eventually dissolved into a soothing numb, cleared my mind and I went back to square one. My shoulders slumped and I frowned as I thought of April. Why would she date Stacy? Why is she dating Stacy? She said she didn't want 'a relationship.' She said she 'wasn't ready for one.' That before she could 'love someone else' she had to learn to 'love herself.' It was just like her to sound like a Hallmark card. What if they got married? Adopted kids? Moved? Then my affections would be for naught. I'd be alone with Lillie, Tim, Dawn and Mark; just sitting around, waiting for divine intervention.

So then she's married. She's forgotten me. She's forgotten us. I don't see her. Lillie doesn't, Dawn doesn't. She's like a ghost. Do I scream? Interfere? Is it right? Is it wrong? Do I know best or only my own bias? How could she do this? Doesn't she know how much she's hurting us? In fact, fuck her. If she wants to run out on her friends then we're better off without her. And as for my sacrifices, my efforts, attempts, failures, and losses—I'll just grin and bear it.

“You put it on,” he said, after removing a raggedy old condom from his wallet, sporting a wrapper design that hadn't been in circulation for years. I slipped off my shirt and tossed it into the corner. He put his hands back on my ass and pulled me forward into his now enlarged bulge, still hidden under his briefs. He went back to suckling my breast and I cringed at an old zit on his back. He moved his hands to the front of me, and unzipped/buttoned my black dress pants. He then gave them a quick yank, bringing them to my lower waist. My white panties clung tightly to my curves. His hand caressed my pussy as I fell onto his lap. His arms were big, but they resembled lumpy fat more than muscle. He had long curly hairs growing all over them and I noticed that he was starting to go bald as he continued feasting on my chest.

He put his hand on top of my head and started pushing me down to his dick, subtly telling me to suck it. I put a lone finger on the other side of his underwear elastic and pulled down. His dick bobbed out, bouncing up and down for a little while until it came to a sturdy rest. It curved to the left somewhat and was average sized, but due to a forest of pubic hair, the length was inconclusive. I cupped his balls with my hands, and dove in. I tongued the bottom of his penis, moving my head back and forth, trying to do what would have made me cum. My hand, that was on his balls, started to soak through with grease so I moved it to rest on his ass. Once I realized his ass was worse I gave up and put it on my tit, still masturbating with the other hand.

“What’s the rent like fowr a place like this?” he asked, leaning back to eye my room.

“I’m kind of busy,” I said in an exasperated voice, scowling before I resumed my activity, regardless of whether or not he was paying attention.

“My brotha’ used to live round here. Paid an arm and a leg fowr rent. He moved out west though. Cheers fowr the Lakers now; go figure. But yeah, I was thinkin’ bout getting a place round here; if the rent wadn’t too much.”

“I don’t rent, I own,” I hissed, pulling back just enough so I could make identifiable sentences.

“How’d a brawd like you affowd this?” he asked, in a testy tone. I glared up at him as I leaned in. “I don’t mean nothin’ by it... just sayin that you don’t exactly look like the kinda chick who can affowd a nice place like this. Hell I can’t even affowd a place like this and I got a roommate.”

“Atds cwas uwwrr aw uuuwsser,” I gurgled, choking myself with his dick, trying to get him to moan so he’d shut up.

“What?”

“Nothing,” I said, slipping back into obsession. If April and my friends weren’t going to stick around and wait for me when I’m sober then why the hell am I doing it in the first place? Maybe they never expected me to do it. Maybe they were leaving me for dead so that they could get out and still feel good about themselves. How could she be so cruel? And they’ll probably take her side too. Anything to leave me in the dirt... and I thought I loved them—loved her.

I stopped sucking for a moment to slap my mental self. My bitching and moaning was pointless and pathetic. Not to mention that it was causing me to make weird gurgling noises. I pulled back, hoping that a different activity might occupy my mind more. I leaned in to lick his neck, which was the only part of him that was well built, but he held me back.

“Hey! Come on; I don’t want no girl who’s been suckin my dick kissin me,” he said, staring at my chest.

“Fine,” I stated blankly, scooching off my pants and kicking them next to my shirt. He shuffled around behind me, bending me over. I rolled my eyes again and submitted to doggy style, with the intent of anal. I related with every other woman forced to take it up the ass. But at least this way I could slip into fantasy while he fucked me. He rammed me a few times after easing it in (I’ll give him credit for doing as much gently) while grasping my love handles.

“Jesus! What the fuck did you chow down on?” he gagged shriveling up his nose while pulling his head away after I farted. I grinned and arched my back, pushing my chest into the mattress. I farted a few more times, laughing and having a gay old time. Eventually he stopped thrusting into my tailbone and flipped me over. “I can take a hint,” he said, spreading my legs wide open. My calf muscles flexed, in mid air, as I stared up at my new

heels. He grabbed the sides of my legs for support and moved his pelvis back and forth. “Seriously, that’s nasty,” he stated, in a huff about my bedroom manners.

“I’d like to see you take it up the ass without giving something back,” I snapped, looking up at a poster print of some modern art painting that Tim had purchased to cover up a hole in the wall. Frankly I preferred the hole.

“Like I’d ever try it... any guy who does shit like that’s nothin but a faggot and a loser,” he exclaimed, much to my dismay.

“Some people like that sort of thing,” I replied, somewhat shaken, causing me to completely miss and thus not appreciate the irony (at least in his opinion) of the situation.

“Wid a chick it’s weird, but wid another guy it’s just disgusting.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Anythin’ anal.”

“But you fucked me.”

“So? I’m the guy. Besides, most chicks don’t let guys do that; like they’re too good fowr it or somethin’.”

“Maybe they just don’t like having something shoved up their ass.”

“Girls like that stuff,” he said, pulling my leg over so that they were now closed, with me on my side.

“So do guys.”

“Not unless they’re fags. And I don’t got nothing’ against fags, I’m just sayin’ that they need to be quiet about that sort a thing. God said ‘Adam and Eve’ not ‘Adam and Steve.’”

“Oh, that’s original,” I stated sarcastically, getting irritated not only by his incompetence intellectually, but in bed as well.

“Why is it that all chicks like gay guys?”

“Because generally they’re friendly, charming people, who don’t treat us like shit,” I said, defensively; feeling as though our conversation had become a battle to justify myself and my friends.

“Bullshit, you just want what you can’t have. Like you say you don’t want guys to fuck you. Like you’re all innocent or somethin’. But then you go out wearin’ slutty clothes trying to get attention and act surprised when it’s the wrong kind. Girls are even worse than guys, cuz you use sex against people, teasin’ ‘em wid it.”

“Some girls wear slutty clothes but most don’t (outside of teenage girls). Guys just think that it’s all about them. Like the reason woman wear skirts to work is to make the businessmen sexually harass them; that’s bullshit. Guys just want to fuck every woman on earth, but they can’t—so they’ll distort reality, to try and keep their dignity, when they realize as much.”

“Man, I’m so sick o’ chicks sayin’ it’s all about sex! Yeah, we wanna fuck. Yeah, it’s important, but eventually every guy settles down.”

“That’s crap! Guys would fuck young, beautiful women forever if they could. But they only have a few years before their hair falls out and the women they’re chasing grow up,” I shrieked, both of us getting into the conversation; a direct result of which was the sex picking up.

“That’s another thing! Woman always thinking they’re so superior. Like being an independent woman is so trendy and great. Guys have been makin’ it fowr forevuh and now it’s like we’re the bad guys cause o’ it.”

“Guys have only been making it at the expense of women! Obviously the oppressor will prevail. And nowadays we’re finally catching up to men and we’re proud of it too. It’s not like it’s trendy, it’s just a sense of accomplishment for overcoming adversity. But guys just bitch like they’re the victims who’ve never done anything wrong. As **if** they’re so righteous.”

“Whateva; chicks just overreact about everything,” he stated, increasing his thrusting speed.

“Guys are underemotional,” I retorted, my voice cracking and swaying as I moved back and forth on my bed.

“Girls expect too much!” he moaned, closing his eyes while leaning back, so he could be further inside me.

“Guys don’t do enough!”

“We do more than you,” he said, slowing down as I had hit a nerve sometime in the midst of him missing mine over and over again.

“Like what?”

“Work for a livin’.”

“We do! But it’s not our fault that you knock us up and leave us to die. Take some fucking responsibility!”

“Just don’t toss ya ass across town and ya won’t have a problem!” he cried, having recently pulled his dick out of that very same ass.

“I’ve had this conversation before!” I yelled, bringing the argument to a momentary halt before I resumed talking. “It doesn’t fucking matter! We’re both biased and have no place in arguing over supposed dominance when in actuality we don’t have a clue about the opposite sex!” I screamed, pressing my chin against the top of my chest so that I could see him. “All men want, is to believe that they’re superior! And all women want is

equality, but the only true equality is the absent thought of equality, so it will never happen! It's a moot point and isn't worth discussing!"

A silence followed and the sound of my ass smacking up against him echoed loudly. He opened his mouth as though he were going to object but shut it quickly, leaving me to assume he was getting ready to cum. He sped up, and pulled me forward by my quads. He looked kind of like he was having some trouble and couldn't quite make it. After a moment more he slowed down and gave me a pissed off look.

"Can you loosen up or what? It's like I'm fucking a muffler," he exclaimed, officially handing me the last straw. I pulled my legs forward, until my knees were by my head, and then pushed them quickly outward. I hit him in the chest and he fell backwards, landing on his ass. I started laughing as he swore and grabbed his clothes with his now limp, unsatisfied dick flopping out my door.

Chapter 11

“When you see them on the street and they’re not blowing kisses at themselves in mirrors, or thinking about how much pussy their arms are gonna get them, then I forget what they’re really like and I’m duped into respecting them,” I told Joyce (a middle aged pessimistic, cynical, moderately attractive, single, disgruntled, business woman) as she glared at a muscular, vain, gorgeous, self-involved/serving/adoring man, who was admiring himself through his workout station’s reflection. “I mean I know I shouldn’t say it, but it’s all I think about when I see them. I’m tired of being ‘politically correct’; these guys piss me off,” I stated in a huff, still wound up over, and thinking about, my fucking fuck up from the night before.

“Guys who end up looking like that are just compensating for the gaping emotion void that fills in for their personalities. If they aren’t talking about some kind of sport, or workout technique, they don’t have dick all, worth letting in your ear. And they always date perky little blondes with implants big enough club a moose. Then they trot off together to have a happy, go lucky, pointless, Ken and Barbie life!” Joyce exclaimed breathing heavily, as she stood up from doing her lat pulls so that I could work in a set. “Is that what beauty is? The ideal figure of a man? I’m so fucking sick of having to chose from fat bald guys who actually treat you the way you want but fuck you the way Freddie Kruger would; and good looking guys who dump you faster than whatever protein supplement their pea sized brains

consumed the night before,” she blurted out, loud enough to make the people around us a little edgy.

“They’re not all the same, they’re just varying degrees of awful,” I replied, moving aside so that she would get her turn on the machine. “All men are statistics. Every single one of them falls into some category, or subcategory outlining the shit that they pull with women. Even the guys who protest and claim to be diverse fall in to one. They’re in denial. It’s like an evolutionary split occurred in the same species. The gradual reparation of which won’t conclude until thousands of years from now, when we’ll have enough frozen sperm to get rid of them... All men are born equal,” I grumbled, pausing for effect. “But all women are born superior.”

“I know exactly what you mean,” she muttered, breathing heavily. “But the funny thing is that I want a man,” she sighed, cutting my rant with a knife.

“Why?” I gasped, clinging to my malcontent. “Why would anybody want or want to be a man?” I said, pausing momentarily as I began to question my motives in the argument.

“Look... I hate that I’m old enough now to have to settle. I hate the possibility, if not the fact, that prince charming has probably ended up with princess charming. I hate that the closest relationship I’ve had with a man in recent years has been the shit I’ve spouted out about them. I hate all of the things that most women trapped being single do,” she stated, slowing down her speech out of self-pity. “I’ve tried to convince myself that I don’t want a man; that I’m happy being single. But the thing is that the reason I’m bitter and jaded is because I still do. If I didn’t care, then I wouldn’t be in the gym five days a week, both seeking out and insulting my incentive. I want to find love, get married, maybe even have a few kids; if I still can,” she said, drawing to a close, now giving me a look as though she felt sorry for me.

I kind of opened and closed my mouth for a few moments, blinking rapidly. I wanted to cry, to tell everyone in the room that, “I’ve had a penis! I’ve changed for the better and don’t regret a thing! That I’ve given up everything, lost and still won!” but I just coughed on some saliva gathering in the back of my throat and spit out, “Me too.”

I shut up and worked out. Joyce and I resorted to small talk as people do when they’ve discussed something uncomfortable. We parted ways and I was left naked and alone in the women’s washroom. In the span of an hour my self-esteem had gone from potent confidence to insecure diarrhea. I stared down at my trimmed pubic hair, encasing both my new, and absence of, genitalia. My perfectly rounded, *el dante*, implants supplied yet another reminder on either side of my gaze. I never felt more alone. But on the bright side my abs were coming along nicely.

I gathered my things, suited up, and headed to the front desk of the gym to replace my membership card that I had dropped in a drain when applying makeup. There was a petite woman, with no body fat and a ponytail sitting in a chair at the desk. She looked up at me cheerily as I plopped my workout bag on the counter and leaned in.

“Hello,” she exclaimed, in an intentionally high pitched greeter tone.

“Hi, I lost my card in the drain; is there any way I can get a new one?”

“Sure, you just have to fill out this form,” she said, sliding me a single sheet of paper. “And then we can print you up one.”

“Great, thank you,” I replied, slinking off to one of a few quasi comfy chairs they had set up along the wall. I dropped my ass heavily into it and filled out the form on my knee. I checked off the box that said ‘female’ first and paused before completing the rest. I looking up and about (as I could never finish anything without taking twice as long as it would take a normal

person) and caught someone staring at me. Not a look, or a glance, or a scan; but that kind of eye contact you get from someone when they're thinking about you and not themselves.

As I always did with people, I immediately looked away, afraid that I had been discovered or, even worse, thought ill of. But then almost as quickly, I raised my eyes again to check if he was still looking. Sure enough he was but this time with a smile. I scanned my memory; trying to think of every guy I'd scammed free drinks from. Every guy I'd fucked and dumped. Every guy I'd known before my operations. Every guy I'd served, insulted and talked to. But I couldn't think of anyone. I didn't know him, and I didn't know why he was staring at me.

I eventually came back to reality, but in all of my reminiscing I had stared long enough to make myself (and, likely, him as well) very uncomfortable. I quickly looked back down at my sheet (that still had nothing more than a checked-off female box) and thought about not looking up. I pretended to fill something in, which was stupid because I needed to fill it in anyway. Then I shuffled around in my chair and crossed my legs. If ever I was a complete idiot, it was when it came to anything potentially romantic. The only exception to which was sex. Of course due to my inability to get laid, in accordance with my stupid behavior beforehand, few people knew what I could do in the sack.

“See the thing is that I wanted to come over and talk to you, but I don't really have anything to say,” the man said, now standing in front of me; his deep voice pulling my gaze up into his dark brown eyes. “You can see how that'd be a problem,” he stated confidently, as though he had rehearsed it (which he probably had). “So I thought that I might as well come over here, put my name on the table, and maybe get yours in return. Then, hopefully, we could come up with something to talk about,” he said, letting a

sly smile creep in as he concluded his pick up. I didn't say anything for a few seconds, using the time to try and convince myself that I was able to. He didn't sway or look away. He just stood there waiting for me to do something.

“Joan,” I stated bluntly, after much hesitation and mental debate.

“Hi Joan, I'm Ade,” he replied, stretching out his hand, that slinked from a clean pressed, navy blue shirt cuff. His shimmering teeth darted my gaze up and away. He was handsome above and beyond his expensive attire. With a look that gave the impression he had built his own success. He made me feel intimidated, interested, and warm.

“Nice to meet you,” I exclaimed, with a slight sway in my voice that made me want to kill myself.

“It's nice to meet you too, Joan,” he said, making a point of saying my name back to me as he continued to gaze. “Do you mind if I have a seat?” he inquired, moving his hand slightly to his side and in the direction of a chair.

“No, not at all,” I managed to spit out in a less than elegant display.

“Just signing up?” he asked, looking down at the form I had attempted to fill out.

“No, I lost my card and I need to fill this out to get a new one,” I replied, my speech gradually decaying to the monotone mundane.

“So do you come here often? I haven't seen you before, but then again I rarely have time to be here myself.”

“I guess I come a lot... But in here,” I said, looking around at the gym. “Time spent is relative, so I suppose not at all,” I exclaimed, saying something somewhat reminiscent of my normal self.

“You’re right, the people here seem to be very dedicated. But you don’t really fit in with the crowd; no offense,” he stated, moving aside a few magazines that he had bumped with his knee when he’d turned towards me.

“Well I’m new, maybe I’ll conform.”

“I hope not, that means I’m next.”

“You act like it’s a cult,” I said, after a brief pause, which I used to break eye contact and look to my left, for no other reason than he was being so forward and confident it baffled me.

“No, I’m probably just jealous.”

“Well it is good to be in shape,” I stated, hoping that he wouldn’t take it as though it were directed at him, since he was somewhat overweight, although still very attractive.

“Yes it is. But personally, I just can’t find the time.”

“I’d tell you to make time, but I don’t know you well enough to be critical,” I joked, chuckling lightly at my own comment; something I did only when I was nervous.

“I’ll have to try that,” he replied, having enjoyed my comment.

“So then what is it that occupies your time so much?” I asked, now filled with enough confidence to squeeze out a question.

“Work. Likely I’ll die at the office the way things have been going.”

“So then how’d you get enough time to come here; assuming you didn’t make it,” I said, trying to be cute.

“One of my clients was beaten by another prisoner last night. So until he’s out of the hospital, which is funny cause he just got out a little while ago, I won’t be able to work on his case.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I stated, now feeling stupid that I had asked the question.

“Don’t be, I’m not. He burned down his girlfriend’s apartment, killed her poodle, and ran into a magazine vendor. The only reason he wasn’t locked up off-the-bat is because he happens to be related to a well known politician.”

“What’s your logic for taking that case?” I asked, recalling my hospital bunkmate and thinking what a small world it was.

“He could afford me. Justice is blind but it’s not cheap; though, to tell you the truth, whenever I take a case like that, it’s often to see the people I’m defending locked up... if only for slightly more time than they would have been had the case gone to someone else.”

“That’s not very nice. Isn’t it your sworn duty to serve the best interests of your client?” I asked, trying to keep a straight face in the process.

“Generally speaking it is, except when it’s in the best interests of the public for me not to,” he replied quickly, as though he’d been asked these questions before.

“Wow, a moral lawyer. Satan’s gonna lose his tan,” I said semi-confidently, my worries and anxiety starting to disappear.

“Very funny,” he exclaimed, leaning towards me.

“Sorry, I’m not going by the stereotype. It’s just that from the experience I’ve had with lawyers, they’ve been a little... Well...” I stated, hesitating to make a declaration of what I thought of lawyers, so as not to offend Ade.

“Well?” he asked playfully, persuading me to be forthcoming and to stop censoring myself.

“Audacious, cocky, arrogant, rude, blunt, pretentious, vindictive... Shall I continue?” I asked, trying to be as pleasant as possible while spouting out a list of plausible traits he may very well possess.

“If you’d like, but I think I understand where you’re coming from,” he said, laughing briefly after I had finished speaking.

“I hope that you’re a different shade of gray.”

“Sort of; I separate my work, from my daily life. If I didn’t, I couldn’t function in society without being burned at the stake by a torch-wielding mob.”

“I hear mob’s can be particularly troublesome with lawyers around this time of year,” I said, now pleased with the way the conversation was progressing.

“Sure are... You must really dislike lawyers.”

“Not so much as I despise them. But from what you’ve said it’s likely that I’ll never have to meet the lawyer in you.”

“No, you won’t; few people do, and rightly so. I don’t imagine he’d be all that much fun to talk to.”

“Not with so many execrable traits in any case,” I said, moving my right shoulder to the top of my chair so I could lean further towards him.

“Ha, I may have bitten off more than I can chew,” he replied, rubbing his forehead and eyes, to exaggerate his reaction to my statement.

“Well, we could always change the subject. You know, as kind of a conversational Heimlich maneuver,” I exclaimed, poking fun at his reference to biting off more than he could chew.

“Worth a try... So what do you do?”

“I work at a clothing store,” I replied, giving the very cleaned up and censored version of where I worked.

“Which one?”

“The Whore House,” I muttered, hoping that he wouldn’t hear me.

“Can’t say I’ve heard of that one. What kind of clothing do you deal with?”

“All kinds,” I answered, giving vague a new name.

“So, based on my current attire, do you suppose I’d be able to find anything to my liking where you work?” he asked, leaving me to admire his beautiful suit once more.

“We might have that in leather,” I stated, laughing lightly at my own joke with my job now under the microscope. In my mind that would lead to how long I’d been working there. What I did before that. I did what? How could I? No... You’ve got to be kidding me... Well it’s been fun but... Have a nice life. End conversation/chance of romance/future/happiness/whatever.

“How long have you lived in the city?” he asked, picking up on how uncomfortable the previous topic had made me.

“Most of my life, I moved here when I grew up,” I said, suddenly feeling very young in comparison to him, and thus very small. “How about you?”

“I grew up in Washington... D.C. that is.”

“I hear it’s nice. What made you want to come here?”

“Business.”

“Right, should have guessed,” I said, tapping my fingers on my knee, as I was afraid that soon he’d grow bored and run away. Then right on cue he

looked at his watch and made a face as though he were late for a very important date.

“I’m sorry Joan, I have to run,” he stated, slinging a leather bag over his shoulder. “It was very nice to meet you,” he said, my heart sinking as he stood up. “And I hope to see you here again.” I heard him say, as my mental banter shut out most of what was going on. I broke eye contact and looked at the front desk woman, flirting with a muscular guy. I saw a Porsche pull into a near by parking spot and a bird shit on its windshield. I recalled my first week at the gym; when some guy on roids had smashed his face in a mirror because he couldn’t lift as much as another guy. And then somewhere in the swirling mess of my delusion, reality kicked in.

“So, if it’s alright with you, maybe I could take you out sometime,” Ade said, grinning and holding out his business card for me to keep, and to call him. I slid my arm forward, delicately taking the card from him; trying to hold back just how overjoyed I was. I watched him leave, remaining still even after he had gone. I smiled widely, contently and genuinely as I stood up and rushed home to finish my cleaning—bathroom and all.

Chapter 12

“You met a guy!” Mark shrieked, stopping dead in his tracks, almost losing his two scoops of mint chocolate chip.

“Yup,” I chuckled, giddy and baffled myself. We were walking home from an ice cream parlor, on a crowded street after midnight. I tried to convey to Mark just how thrilled I was about the chance of romance, without bringing up my fears of going down that road again. The only problem being that I knew where the conversation was headed but hadn’t prepared myself for the inevitable nostalgic infatuation/devastation/regurgitation.

“But that wasn’t even on the agenda!”

“I know, it just kind of happened.”

“So tell me about him!”

“Well his names Ade; he’s about my height (5’9”), very good looking although a little over weight. He has dark brown eyes and a short afro. He’s a lawyer, but a nice one. And he’s very, very charming,” I replied, coming up with as much as I could think of based on our brief meeting.

“When are you going out?”

“I don’t know; I have to call him.”

“So what are you waiting for?” Mark squealed, tonguing a chocolate chip as a neon explosion of lights created the illusion of daylight.

“I met him yesterday, Mark. I’m not that desperate,” I said, trying to get enough ice cream, peanuts, fudge and whipped cream on to one spoonful to satisfy all of my desires.

“Yes you are! Call him!”

“Guys, I mean straight guys, don’t like jumping into things with two feet. There are so many games that you have to play before you can show the other person any genuine affection.”

“But I’ve fucked tons of straight guys within hours of meeting them,” Mark said paradoxically

“Yeah, but sex isn’t genuine affection.”

“So what do you want from him, a key to his apartment and a ring? It takes time with everyone Joan, even if they are straight.” he stated chuckling, bumping his ice cream into a man wearing a suede coat as he pushed past us.

“No, I’m a god damn transsexual, Mark. If we even get past the first date it’ll be a shock,” I explained, giving into reality. I swallowed hard, forcing down some nuts upon mention of my former balls. I hated being negative, but it was the truth; any possible relationship with Ade was likely doomed from the start.

“Ok,” he muttered, pausing briefly. “If you’re so worried about it, don’t call him. Or even better, don’t tell him.”

“There’s no way—I’m not gonna be one of those people who ten years into the marriage has a nervous breakdown and spills the beans about their ‘true identity.’ I can’t start any relationship with a lie, not one that I want to keep anyway.”

“Yeah, but if you don’t start it with a lie you’ll get depressed and start obsessing, just like last time. And I’m not willing to go through that

again,” Mark said, referring to three years prior and the subject I had so reluctantly been awaiting.

“I wasn’t obsessing; why the hell does everyone keep saying that? I didn’t do it for her, I did it for me, she just happened to be headed in the same direction.”

“You cut off your dick Joan. And it’s one hell of a coincidence that the decision to do so came a week after you broke up with April,” Mark exclaimed, doubting my motives for the sex change, and the way I had been living my life. I stopped breathing and looked off into nothing. There had always been this kind of unspoken pact between my friends and I to never bring mention to my former relationship with April. And with that left dwindling in my mind, flashback set in and I ignored Mark.

“I can’t see you anymore,” April said, changing from looking at me to, a half eaten egg and some burnt toast on her plate. We were in a crappy diner a few blocks away from my house—one of those shabby places where everything glows of the dusty yellow given off by archaic light bulbs. The kind of establishment where middle-aged, career-women waitresses all wore broken-down sneakers and knee-length skirts. You’d get your coffee, to sober you up from your beer. Have an egg to keep your stomach from eating itself and then head home to pass out. But this was before all that—before everything went wrong. Even before my sex change. This was the last time I was happy.

“What?” I exclaimed, lightly laughing as the prospect of April and I breaking up was so absurd that it couldn’t be anything but comical.

“I’m breaking up with you,” she stated, looking up from her egg yolk that had now popped out of its fried husk and bled all over her hash browns.

“Yeah,” I said still chuckling, and thrusting my fork downward into an undercooked waffle drenched in butter, whipped cream, and some sort of blueberry ooze that was leeching onto my shirtsleeve.

“I’m gay, John,” she whispered, as Doris (or Patty or whatever retro fifties title the waitresses were assigned) passed by.

“Right,” I muttered shaking my head and widening my eyes. Just passing the whole thing off as though it were some kind of joke that I should get, but didn’t.

“I mean it John; I like pussy, cunts, vaginas, bearded tacos, are you even listening to me?” she whispered, this time not for the waitress’ sake but because she was always discrete when using words that she was afraid would offend other people.

“I’m not getting this,” I said squinting, a pocket of waffle batter splattering in the back of my mouth as I spoke. I didn’t say anything for a minute, and used the time to swallow. “But April, we just fucked a few hours ago!” I cried, playing along, and drawing the attention of a few near by diners.

“You fucked me John, I wasn’t there. I haven’t been there for a while. Didn’t you notice?” she sighed, the desperation in her voice starting to grow more potent with every word she said. “I don’t find you attractive anymore. I don’t know if I ever did.”

“That’s preposterous! Look at these guns!” I exclaimed, flexing my scrawny arms while folding my bottom lip downward to make a mean face.

“John, I’m serious,” she said, stretching out her hand and placing it on mine as I grasped my fork tightly. I slowly lowered the arm I had been flexing and let my expression go limp. As I stared at her face filled with sorrow and grief, fear was the reflection.

“Are you fucking serious?” I asked, in a now worried and distraught tone.

“I’m sorry, John.”

“What do you mean you’re gay? And what the fuck are you talking about you don’t find me attractive anymore?” I cried, spitting out just a few of the thousand questions bumping off each other in my head.

“I’m a lesbian, I don’t find men physically attractive,” she replied slowly, making sure to keep her voice down, hoping that I would do the same.

“April we’ve been dating for two years now! Are you telling me that the whole time you were just faking it? That you were really thinking about women and not me? Has this whole relationship been a lie or what? I mean come on! You can’t be gay!” I yelled, sinking into denial—hoping that I could boomerang her ambitions to go queer.

“I don’t know what I’ve thought for the last few years. And I haven’t been faking it. I do love you, but I can’t be with you.”

“That’s such bullshit! How the hell do you even know you’re gay? I mean maybe you’re just having some kind of psychotic episode,” I exclaimed, frantically trying to grasp the situation. I tuned out of reality and prayed to be pinched. My breath quickened while my thoughts tried to catch up to my emotions.

“I know I am, that shouldn’t be an issue. What you need to know is that I love you very much, but we can’t keep dating,” she said again.

“I don’t fucking believe this,” I muttered falling back into the booth. “How can you say that it’s not an issue? And how can you leave someone if you love them?”

“Look I know you’re upset,” she said pushing her plate to her left so that she could lean in and talk with me more closely.

“I think I have a right to be,” I snapped, interrupting her.

“Yes, you do. But I need you to listen to me. Ok?” she stated, maintaining her composure as she had had time to prepare. She slid forward, trying to take my hands, but I pulled them away, anticipating her actions. I looked to my side, staring out the window and down the road at a fading streetlight. “Ok?” she asked again, repeating herself, since I had remained silent for too long.

“Whatever,” I whined, the feeling starting to fade from my voice as depression set in.

“This isn’t anything that’s just happened recently,” she said, starting an explanation that couldn’t possibly counteract the shock already induced. “First I had my doubts about us. I thought that maybe it was you, or that we were in a slump or something,” she explained, bringing my eyes back to focus on her once again. “I cheated on you a few weeks ago,” she stated, pausing momentarily afterwards; expecting some sort of reaction from me. Instead I sat still, now slumping forward, frowning and glaring at her. “It was with Marry; you met her at the Christmas party.”

“She seemed nice,” I said, my voice now so fragile that the words cracked and swayed as I slowly spoke. My vision blurred, my heart thudded and my life stopped. You never really know love until you’ve lost it.

“I don’t love her, I...” she began to say, up ‘til I cut her off.

“I don’t care if you love her or not; or why you slept with someone else, or if you’re gay. All I care about is us, and you’re telling me that that’s over,” I stated, my eyes starting to swell as I felt the tears on their way.

“Yes,” she replied, after a long silence that we spent staring at each other.

“Then I guess that’s all that needs to be said,” I sighed, pulling my coat over my left arm and standing up. I tossed a few bills onto the table without bothering to check them and started to walk out of the diner.

“John, wait,” she said, getting up to follow me despite the speed of my departure. I ignored her and pushed the swinging door hard with my forearm. I stepped outside into a light flutter of snow. It stuck to my hair and coat and melted slowly. I tucked my hands into my pockets and started to walk away, feeling the slush on the street splash around my feet. “John!” April cried from behind me, running up and turning me by my arm.

“What?”

“I don’t want to lose you,” she said, after a stunned silence when she noticed a tear rolling down my cheek.

“I don’t care what you want,” I answered, looking around her, not at her.

“I know that you’re going to need time alone, but promise me that when you’re ready you’ll call me,” she stated, placing her hand on my left tricep. “I do love you John.”

“Stop saying that,” I whispered, lightly grasping her hand and placing it back at her side.

She stopped talking and looked away to try and prevent herself from crying. I crept away and didn’t look back; I wasn’t strong enough. I just walked home, keeping my head down.

I remember arriving home and wishing I were still out. But by that time I was stuck inside and that would mean all I could do was obsess. I knew I should go out, find something to occupy my time; find anything to occupy my time. But depression swallows you whole. It erases everything and replaces it with a void of feeling: a lapse of life. A spiteful clarity masked only by

confusion and contempt. At first it was a busy dread. One filled with thought and lazy anticipation for whatever would happen next. I'd turn on the TV and think of nothing but April. I lost my appetite. I didn't talk to anyone. I'd lie in bed and cry. And then when I'd get up and yell at myself enough to try and attempt a recovery, I'd just collapse all over. It wasn't as though time had stopped; it was as though it had been devoured by indifference. I didn't care about anything. The phone would ring and I wouldn't even think of picking it up. The answering machine would play back a happy me; asking whoever cared enough, to sit through the pre-record phase, to leave a message. Then there'd be a long beep followed by someone trying to convince me to pick up the phone.

"John, please pick up the phone..." Lillie would say, in a pitiful voice that made me hate him for sounding even more pathetic than I felt.

"John, I know I'm the last person you want to hear from, but Lillie said he hasn't been able to get a hold of you for days and I'm worried..." April's piercing, squeaky, high message would play.

Clothes didn't matter. I lived in my bathrobe, in isolation, without a trace of my existence. The kind of caveman-hermit lifestyle so well known to anyone who's been dumped. It got to the point where wiping my ass was the high point of my day. Jerking off failed, I couldn't eat (since the only time I was hungry was when I was bored). The mashed up Fruit Loops would lie on the bottom of my mouth, waiting to be swallowed; but after a few moments I'd realize I just didn't have it in me and spit a colorful blob back into a pool of milk. Things went on like this for days. If it weren't for my Scooby Doo alarm clock I doubt I ever would have known when one day stopped and the next began. Then on Sunday, early in the morning of a sleepless night, I sat up and I was bored. I actually felt bored, and that gave me hope.

I slapped my feet onto the floor and leaned forward, resting my elbows on my knees. And then looking up from my dirty underwear to stare blankly ahead, a pair of shoes that I had stolen from my sister, just before I had succumb to her ways, caught my eye. A pair of clogs resting next to my sneakers in the corner of my closet. I didn't think about my sister or how she had told my parents when I smoked weed for the first time, or how she would get the car while I was forced to stay at home and watch FRIENDS reruns every Friday night. Instead I got a flash of me wearing the clogs in my room. Not for a sexual thing, and not because I needed the height, but just because. As the thought passed, analytically I stopped. Then I rewound and I thought of only wanting to play with the girls in school. Fast forward, pause, and play to a disorderly childhood filled with denial and loss. Maybe even enough to blind me. I remembered dressing up as a woman every Halloween. Inevitably coming to the realization that I was a cross dresser. Then there was a period of dead calm in my life. A kind of eerie bewilderment as I slunk into what I thought was happiness. April and I dated for two years, and now that it was over, I could think without loss or consequence. And, staring at those clogs, I did just that.

*It was kind of like getting stabbed with a cattle prod; one of those mental storms where you know a headache's brooding. It wasn't just April that was making me hurt; It was me. Some kind of lingering ideal that had been kept in the back of my mind to the point of my own ignorance; torturing me until my smile was a lie and my laugh an echo. It was astonishing that it had only **just** become clear to me. I dropped my jaw, opened my eyes and let out a half laugh, half groan as I looked ahead.*

I knew I loved April; I had never doubted that. But in light of the situation I doubted myself and I was right. Something was wrong, very wrong, and I don't think I'd ever felt worse. At first, sitting in one place for hours locked in mental conflict, it was my own refusal to consider revelation.

To explore what seemed so right, or even contemplate what could make me happy. I wondered what people would think, what April would think. I wondered if it could be done. If I were willing to go through with it, even though I knew I wanted to—I needed to. And I wondered if my motives were just; whether or not I was ready to change my life without hesitation. My mind wouldn't shut up. It was overwhelming. But in the same cluster of confusion I knew I'd already made my decision. I stared at the clogs open mouthed and drooling, trapped in my runaway train of thought.

A sudden euphoria came over me; substituting indifference for determination. Once again I had something to live for; to work towards and build up to. I tried to concentrate on one thing at a time. Blocking out the doubts and disbelief so I could think. I breathed in deeply, closed my eyes and brain stormed about where to start.

I snapped back to reality to find a palm mark on my cheek and Mark fuming. My ice cream had melted a little and the street wasn't as crowded. I frowned and lifted the hand not holding anything up to rub my cheek as I said, "Ow."

"What the fuck was that about?" Mark cried, putting on somewhat of a show, as he was one of those people that would give off a lot of smoke with no fire.

"What was what about?" I asked, reaching for my spoon to try and counteract my melting ice cream.

"You ignored me for like the last minute and a half!" he shrieked, taking a big bite off of the top of his cone.

"Oh, sorry," I stated, still caught up in my engulfing reminiscing.

“So did you catch anything that I said to you?” he asked calming down somewhat, since his voice got deeper when he was upset. I stared blankly at him for a moment, as a drizzle of ice cream came down the side of my mouth before my tongue lapped it up. He rolled his eyes and tossed what was left of his dessert since he hated to eat the cone. “I said, ‘Since you’re sober now, and you’ve gotten your act together, why don’t you try and talk to your friends again?’” he snapped, slapping his hands together to try and get the flakes of sugar cone off his fingertips.

“I hadn’t even thought about that,” I chuckled, surprised that I had lost track of my goal in its pursuit. “Do you think they’d even talk to me?” I asked, scraping my spoon on the bottom of my paper bowl as I neared the end of my sundae.

“Why wouldn’t they? You’ve caught up with every other functional member of society.”

“Wow... I don’t even know where to start,” I muttered as we trotted down the sidewalk towards my apartment.

“I’ve heard that before,” he said, causing me to drift into memory and ignore him once again.

Chapter 13

The streetlamp cast a lingering glow onto my far wall, stretching and elongating the shadows of my furniture. I breathed in deeply—listening, through my open window, to the sounds of the city. I slammed my head against my pillow a few times and arched my back to try and fall into comfort. I caught a cool gust of wind as I did so and turned onto my side, pulling the covers over me. I couldn't sleep. I lay there staring at the poorly lit figure of a dildo in the wind; smacking against the curtains as they flickered behind it. And as I tossed about in frustration, gazing off into nothing, I heard a car horn go off, the screech of spinning tires cut short, and a crash outside. I almost sat up but indifference and recognition for how utterly useless I'd be kept me still. I heard a door open and one of the people in the accident screaming profanities, giving me a sense of relief. There was a kind of initial outrage exchange as the drivers yelled and threatened each other. I caught half of an "Are you—king—u fucking—hole!" from one of them but steam shooting out of some part of a car made it hard to piece together. Then after another moments focus, I lost my concentration and for some reason resorted to nostalgia.

"What do you mean we're not drinking?" Dawn gasped, giving me as much enthusiasm as ever, when I denied him pleasure.

"We will, just not right now; I have something I need to tell everyone," I announced in my well lit, previously tidied, expensive,

extravagantly furnished, abode. I was the centerpiece of the night, with my friends gathered around to hear the first of my plans to get a sex change. It was a week after April and I had broken up. I had stopped feeling sorry for myself and stumbled on the fact that I was transgendered. Immediately after which calling up my friends to arrange this get together, much to their surprise.

Dawn had brought along his long-time on-and-off, fuck buddy, Donata. She was an Italian model who didn't speak a word of English and would always glare at us while making exasperated noises and whispering to Dawn. She was the epitome of beauty. But any more than an hour around her made me want to kill myself. Her long, straight, black hair shone and flickered in a controlled fairy tale wind. She had on a nauseatingly expensive/revealing/sexy/make-you-want-to-do-anything-to-have it, black dress. Think Aphrodite... think dictionary beautiful... think of anything else just to keep your sanity. But even though Lillie and I made it quite clear that we didn't want her around, Dawn would still have her show up without warning.

April was uneasily sitting on the far right side of my couch, twiddling her fingers and massaging the side of her Pepsi. She avoided eye contact with me, as did I with her. Lillie was sitting next to her, trying to brush the salt off of a few peanuts from a large bowl on my table. As for Tim and Mark—they hadn't arrived yet. I made a sort of 'clearing my throat' noise to try and get everyone's attention. The light chatter that had previously filled the air muted, and everyone focused on me. Before speaking, I gave a quick mental reminder: moment of truth—don't fuck it up.

"I'm going to begin hormone treatments and, hopefully, get a sex change," I stated frankly, after a short time contemplating whether or not I'd lead up to it. The room grew even quieter after the words came out of my

mouth and everyone gave me a shocked, if not bewildered, expression. I went from face to face examining their reactions, trying to assess if I should speak or just let them. Lillie's mouth had opened and his brow had sunk down leaving him with a squinty, disgusted look. April had stopped staring at her Pepsi and looked at me with her lips on the edge of speech, in the shape of a peckish kiss. As for Dawn, he remained untainted from my statement. Eventually he gave a light wince but only as the elbow of Donata nudged him a few times so he could translate what I said for her. He lightly whispered, what I assumed were my words to her ear, and she started cracking up. After her piercing laugh faded from the hollow noise of my friends, Dawn leaned forward to say something.

"Can we drink now?" he asked sternly, resting his forearms on his knees to prop himself up. I nodded, looked at the floor and then up again as he entered the kitchen.

"What?" Lillie said, while Dawn opened my freezer; removing the vodka and retrieving the proper utensils to make himself a martini.

"I'm going to have a sex change," I stated once more, clearly this time, and without the initial angst of my proclamation. Lillie kind of gave a titty twister to the air and mouthed a few words of wonder as his head slunk downward.

"Are you serious?" he asked looking up at me once more. His eyes widening this time, as he pushed aside disbelief and took in possibility. I nodded and gave a brief look of disapproval to Donata who was scratching some undoubtedly priceless nail polish onto my floor. "Why?" Lillie spit out after a few failed attempts.

"Because I'm transgendered," I exclaimed, the answer seeming so obvious and without a needed explanation.

“Do you have any olives?” Dawn shouted, from the kitchen as his head poked out enough to see me.

“They’re on the arm of the fridge,” I replied, redirecting my attention to Dawn rather than Lillie.

“You’re not a transsexual,” Lillie stated, shifting gears by shaking his head.

“Yes, I am,” I said, countering him by nodding.

“No, you’re a transvestite,” he exclaimed, creeping towards the notion that this was all just silly. “You’re too old to be a transsexual.”

I shot Lillie a look as though he were crazy and also tried to include a little bit of hurt so that he’d stop being such an ass about things. As for April, she remained still with her unblinking eyes locked on me. Donata had wandered off somewhere and it wasn’t until I heard a slight moan come from the kitchen that I knew she had reunited with Dawn.

“Most transsexuals know they’re different early on. They don’t just come to realize it when they’re bordering on 30,” Lillie snapped, getting a little too worked up to justify.

“Actually, no... and that doesn’t mean it can’t happen.”

“Still, there are things that they go through in their lives that set them apart from the norm,” Lillie babbled, telling me everything I already knew and didn’t care to hear again.

“I’ve hardly ever been part of the norm.”

“You know what I mean,” he stated, a long pause following as we all stared at someone waiting for something to happen. “This just doesn’t make sense,” Lillie sighed, falling back into his chair, bringing his hand to rest on his forehead.

“Why... is this such... a big deal for you?” I asked, slowly, hoping to phrase it so that he wouldn’t go off again.

“Isn’t it for you?”

“Yeah, but it should be for me; you don’t really have a right to be anything but supportive,” I said cautiously, standing my ground and staring him in the eye as April’s gaze shot back and forth between us.

“I don’t know why it’s such a big deal—It’s just a surprise,” Lillie exclaimed, rubbing his fingers on his forehead. “It’s just a little hard to see you as a woman.”

“But I am one.” I stated, a long pause in the conversation following my words, as we listened to Donata’s back press against my microwave while her bare ass squeaked on the counter. Dawn gave out the moan that he always did at about the mid point of sex and then sped up so that he could fix himself a drink.

“It’s a little weird that this should happen a week after we broke up,” April said, causing me to drop the conversation with Lillie and put on the gloves with her. Lillie slunk into his chair and became the spectator for the time being as I contemplated the notion of my sex change being for April’s sake.

“Yeah, it’s a coincidence. But that doesn’t mean it’s any less genuine,” I announced, proud that I had been able to hold myself as well as I had. I looked towards the kitchen when I heard a bowl fall and Donata give out shrill screams between Italian sex talk. Dawn was panting and, from what I could tell by the noise, removing the olives from the fridge while he fucked her. Eventually he exhaled with all his might and she gave off a final scream, loud enough to make us all flinch. End of round one.

“I swear tah fuckin’ God; if you point at me one more time, I’m gonna rip off yah sack and use it as an ashtray!” one of the drivers screamed, in a thick New York accent, throwing profanities and threats back and forth with the other guy.

“Ya hit my car ya fat fuck! And I’m only pointin atcha to move the rolls blockin ya face!” the other guy yelled, in an equally New York accent.

I tuned out for a few seconds and focused on the wall that was shaking to my right as I lay in bed. I heard muffled screams of pleasure as specs of plaster fell from my ceiling. The couple that lived next door to me never had sex. This meant that one of them was having an affair. I giggled as I recalled the man from nextdoor retrieving a paper in the nude but I was interrupted, in mid-thought, by the two guys yelling again.

“Come here ya fuck!” someone shouted, as the sound of feet shuffling commenced. “Try sayin that to me again without gettin smacked!”

“I’m waitin right here, whenever you’re ready!” the other guy replied angrily.

“I’m waiting,” April said in a tense tone, anticipating my reply to her question.

“This isn’t about you April.”

“How do you expect me to believe that?” she sighed, growing noticeably more and more overwhelmed.

“As much as I love you,” I said, locking my eyes with hers. “I wouldn’t do this for you. It’s about what I want, what I need, not you. Trust me when I say that.”

“You’re a man John; plain and simple,” she stated, turning my well-intentioned gaze into a resentful glare.

“No I’m not.”

“You look like a man, you smell like a man, you can’t even stop and ask for directions. And then there’s that protrusion between your legs that outdoes all the other stuff proving you’re a guy!” she said, raising her voice as she drew to a close.

“That’s sex, not gender. I am a woman whether you believe it or not,” I stated, raising my voice as well, so that I’d seem equal in comparison.

“What the fuck’s the difference!” she screamed, swearing, with intent, for the first and last time I would ever hear. “A hacksaw and some tits won’t get me back John! How can you be so stupid?”

“I told you this isn’t about you! If you can’t love me, because you think I’m a man, fine. But I’m not trying to prove otherwise, I’m just doing what I need to be happy!” I yelled, rocking forward in my seat, getting more into the argument.

“We broke up a week ago! And the fact that you’d invite me here after such a short break suggests that you have an ulterior motive,” she spouted out quickly, while Lillie leaned forward in his chair as though he wished to speak upon the next break in the argument. “There hasn’t been time to come to this decision. It’s rash and...” she exclaimed, stopping because she couldn’t come up with the right word to use.

“Appropriate,” Lillie blurted out, in the brief pause between April and me shouting at each other. She stopped frowning and looked at him awe struck. I did the same and at least April and I agreed on our mutual confusion from Lillie’s statement.

“What?” April wheezed, in the same manner that Lillie had questioned me earlier in the night.

“April, believe me, I can understand just how much of a surprise this is. But assuming that John is a woman isn’t it appropriate for him to invite you here if for no other reason than closure?” he asked, constantly looking back and forth between April and myself who were now on our feet. “Granted it’s a little premature, but if I were him I wouldn’t want to wait another minute, I couldn’t.”

“Are you being sarcastic?” April asked, as he had spoken in the, Hallmark-fashion that she normally did.

“No, I’m serious,” he said, rolling his eyes in the direction of the kitchen as whatever Dawn and Donata were doing, started all over. We all stood there for a few seconds, waiting for someone to bring up another topic or subdivision of the current one; but all we could pay attention to was the noise coming from the other room. To Dawn, happiness was butt-fucking a beautiful woman. End of round two.

The sexual screams dented my ears even more than they did my ceiling, and I started to feel overwhelmed. The motorists were bitching, my walls were wailing, and for some reason all of this melodrama blended in with my reminiscing to make it even more stressfully potent. I shot a glance over to the dildo, which had remained sturdy throughout the course of the night, and exhaled loudly; expressing to myself just how pissed off I was. My sheets, that were now covering no more than half my bush and bristly legs, started to heat up from a residual nervous sweat. I peeled my back off of my fresh mattress and sat up, leaving my spine in the shape of a banana as I contemplated what to do at three AM. Then I felt the need to continue eavesdropping as the siren rolled up and the doors of the cop car waited to open, to resolve the dilemma.

The 'ding dong' of the doorbell saved us the trouble of saying anything and provided a pleasant change from the sweaty smacking together of Dawn and Donata. I lazily walked over to answer it and grasped the cold metal knob, pulling the door open to find myself staring at Mark and Tim. They were both smiling and for a moment duped me into the blissful ignorance so enjoyed by everyone (except me) before my announcement.

"Fuck, I'm sorry we're so late John. Some old bitch was eying Tim and I had to put her in her place," Mark exclaimed, trotting past me, into the dormant dispute held in my stage like living room. I watched him pass, lacking the courage to fill him in on the recent proceedings, and then turned to look at Tim once more who was still waiting in my doorway.

"We actually had a rather large fight about it, so I apologize if I'm in a pissy mood," Tim stated, stepping forward and bringing his jacket into a fold that draped over his right arm.

"Well Tim, all things relative, you'll be a delight," I said, walking into the living room to find Mark's astonished expression as he spoke to both Lillie and April. They all paused and looked up at us as we entered the room. Tim's attention was focused on the much more blatant display of noise coming from the kitchen, but he quickly redirected his gaze when Mark opened his big yap.

"You're getting a fucking sex change!" Mark shrieked, standing motionless, having dropped his jaw in the middle of my living room. April and Lillie looked off into the corners, after the commotion started again, leaving me with two more people to justify myself to.

"You're what?" Tim gasped, stopping dead in his tracks, in spite of his peripheral view of Donata taking it doggy style.

"I'm getting a sex change," I muttered, starting to regret that I had told anyone.

“Why?” Tim and Mark asked in unison.

“Because I’m transgendered,” I groaned, from the utter agony of having to restate everything.

“Since when?” Mark asked, in a shrill voice.

“Always, I guess,” I said, making myself sound like an idiot for only coming to realize it recently.

“And you never told us?” Mark asked, in an overly dramatic and hurt tone that made me ill.

“I didn’t know,” I exclaimed, ashamed of the fact that I had to confess how naïve I’d been.

“How could you not know?”

“It’s complicated,” I stated, not knowing the answer myself. In truth I should have known, but didn’t. And with that thought I lost sight of the conversation just as April jumped in with the declaration that “I’m not a transsexual and it’s all for her.” Her comment caused a heated debate that numbed my ears and let me think, as shouting became the tempo. I tried to think of it psychologically. How I could be ignorant of my own gender? How something so huge could simply not occur to me, and life would continue as though it never mattered to begin with. But it did, and it was only becoming clear now. Then I started to panic. Maybe April was right. Maybe the whole thing was just a desperate plea for her affection and I was in denial. But I knew it wasn’t for her, and it felt wrong to think otherwise.

I squinted and frowned as I stared off into space, looking through my friends as they shouted and argued for my fault or favor. And then the question became clear; am I a man or a woman? I thought hard for a few seconds, but nothing came of it and there was no gut feeling or answer to be seen. There was no absolution or euphoric bliss that swelled over me upon

my revelation of what eventually came to mind; it only confused me more. I know I'm not a man, but does that make me a woman? After all those are my only options, and I had to make a distinction. I needed to fit into either the square or the round hole and in doing so put everyone's minds to rest. But I couldn't. I couldn't decipher what part of me was, or was not, of one gender. I couldn't conclude or, for that matter, hypothesize who I am. All I knew was what I wanted—regardless of whatever motives or incentives may have driven that want. Whatever delusions, misconceptions or supposed needs; it was, in fact, the only thing of which I was certain; and therefore the only thing I could trust.

“How do you know you're transgendered?” Tim asked me gently, behind the needless arguing of my friends. I took in a sharp breath as I was sucked back into the moment to focus on something external.

“I can't prove if I am; I don't see why I should have to. But I know I believe it, and I trust what I know,” I mumbled, trying to piece together the fragments of thought that had come flooding to mind.

“Then that's good enough for me,” Tim said, comfortingly as I turned once again to face the outrage of my still feuding guests.

“And then this asshole turns head on in tah me!” one of the drivers shouted at an officer.

“Someone musta skull fucked ya good! You turned into me ya crazy fuck!” the other driver yelled back.

“I'm going to have to ask you both to refrain from shouting,” the officer tried to say politely, but he was drowned out by the arguing.

“April just calm down,” Tim said, as she had burst into another fury while I stood in the doorway of my foyer watching the dispute from afar.

“Oooww my gaawwdd! Fuwwkk knee hawdaa!” the woman next door screamed out of lust. But as her cries went through the wall it made her sound like a four-year-old with a speech impediment.

“Si, Si!” Donata howled, as her tits flopped against my microwave door.

Then I kind of lost track of what was happening now, and what I already went through. My eyes were closed and the audio from the present was leeching into my memory dominating the dispute. I couldn't tell if I was more upset about my car being smashed up or my friend's lack of support for my choices. I know I bit my tongue hard enough to make it bleed. I know I gave a blind eye to Dawn one more time. And I know I didn't use the balls I had to say what I wanted.

“Dawn, stop fucking in my kitchen!” I screamed loud enough to deafen and shut up everyone. Then while I had the spotlight I stomped over to Dawn and Donata in the kitchen and threw their clothes in their faces. After which I wobbled back to the living room, shaking so much it dented my stride. I struck a pose, shot a glare, and opened my mouth to suck in a whirlwind by which I would unleash all hell.

“Why the fuck are you fighting? It's pointless! This is my decision, and the last thing I need right now is to be put down by the people I felt close enough to, to let in the know! Do you honestly think I haven't thought about

what it'll be like? How people will treat me? How I'll likely be alone for the rest of my life? But even with all that, you question my commitment? Then fuck you! If I need to cut off my dick to feel complete, it's my call and the least I should expect is support from my friends!" I shouted, coming to a close just in time to hear my echo die.

"Lady I don't give two sacks a shit whatcha do wid ya dick," one of the drivers told me as I leaned out my open window, grasping my bedside table. The street was on mute and everyone, including myself, stopped to reflect on the crazy lady yelling out her window. I focused for a moment, even though everyone outside was looking at me as though I were utterly insane, and I came to realize that I might have stood up for myself a little too late. If only I had.

I contemplated saying 'I'm sorry,' but as they started laughing I retracted my head and pulled the window closed, cutting their howls in half. I released my stern grip of the table to see my previously sturdy dildo fall to the floor and roll under my bed. And then I started laughing just as hard as any of them. Regret is the perspective to see character gained from mistakes, and using that character to imagine what could have been.

Chapter 14

“Fame is the absolution of the lonely,” Dawn told me as he scooped up what seemed like a pound of truffle shavings onto his fork. He sat slouched forward on his suede couch staring at his wall-sized, plasma TV, while devouring whatever priceless meal he had prepared for himself; ignoring me all the while I might add. Dawn was the first one of my friends that I had spoken with since I’d sobered up. I had gone to see him before anyone else for a few reasons. First, I’d known him the longest. Second, I’m the only person (besides Donata) that he can talk to (which pretty much guaranteed me his forgiveness). And third, I needed someone a little less critical backing me (before I tried to patch things up with April and Lillie).

“Why’s that?” I asked, squeezing out a burp mid sentence.

“Well think about it,” he said, using his knife to point at a few wanna-be celebrities on a reality television show. “They all want to be the next big star, regardless of whatever talent gets them there,” he exclaimed, slicing into his cut of blood rare, cranberry lamb. “Their desperation has made them shallow. But what’s worse is that shows like this exploit that desire and cheapen the arts in doing so,” he stated, trying to speak clearly despite a large chunk of meat jammed in his cheek.

“They’re just giving people a shot at their dreams, everyone deserves that. And I seriously doubt that they’re competing because they’re lonely,” I replied, leaning back into the couch, and away from the food, as my nostrils had taken enough temptation for one night.

I watched Dawn, momentarily thinking that I could relish my successful return to a friendship. I focused on his clenching square jaw and sleek cheek bones while he made smacking/chewing noises, eating his food. He had that too-pretty-to-be-a-boy look with a shot of handsome and a splash of perfect. His black turtleneck, that could just have easily been purchased at Banana Republic for four hundred dollars less, hugged his muscular body.

I squinted when he noticed me watching him, picking up on a covert acknowledgment that he felt as relieved to see me as I did him. He would never have admitted he'd worried, or cared for that matter. Dawn was the maturation of a spoiled brat in a tantrum. But if you could peel away the cocky, indignant charade you'd see his belligerent love and learn to laugh at its shroud. Of course, that took years. And nobody knew him quite like myself.

“But think about the sacrifices they make for fame; it’s just pathetic.”

“Everybody makes sacrifices and I can’t see any better reason than absolution.”

“But it’s not there. All they’ll get is fabricated resolve,” he said, looking at me for the first time since the last commercial. His grayish-blue eyes drifted to my hand, uncomfortably rubbing my arm.

“No, it’s there... it just takes more than change,” I muttered, thinking of something else completely. Dawn made a confused face and frowned.

“What the hell does change have to do with this? I’m talking about fame,” he exclaimed, setting sail for the bottom of things.

“Do you think I should grow my nails out?” I asked, in a ditsy tone, trying not to make it obvious that I wanted to change the subject.

“No, long nails are ugly and they get in the way,” Dawn said, taking large gulps of his wine as he went back to looking at the TV.

“Well, then, what if I paint them?” I suggested, sticking to my conversational distraction.

“That would make them even worse.”

“Maybe a glaze would make them look nice,” I stated, sounding like a thousand melted down Barbie’s, poured into a transsexual mold.

“Why are we discussing your nails? You know I hate small talk,” Dawn grumbled, making an ugly face when one of the contestants fucked up a high note.

“Well then what do you want to talk about?” I asked in a huff, crossing my arms and slumping down into the couch.

“Why don’t you tell me more about that guy you met,” Dawn said, pretending he cared enough about my life to lend a deaf ear.

“You mean Ade?”

“Is he the one you went on a date with?” Dawn inquired, his attention gradually drifting away from me to focus on an obese teenager, wearing skin tight jeans, attempting to break dance.

“Yeah.”

“So fucking tell me about him then!” Dawn exclaimed, glancing in my direction.

“Do you want to know about him, or our date?” I asked, quickly diving into an explanation about whichever I preferred when Dawn rolled his eyes, and opened his mouth to object. I stared off into space and thought of wavy lines and a harp playing, to cue yet another one of my flashbacks.

I think I was sweating, but it could've been the heat. But then again even if I were, it would only cause the candlelight to illuminate me; so that's good. On my lap I was twisting a napkin. I'd destroyed the beautiful swan that graced my plate prior to the meal; which by the way I had just noticed was getting cold. I didn't know if I should eat or talk. I couldn't do both and, if I tried, I'd choke. I ordered an expensive meal and it was going to waste. But it's not like I could enjoy it. I was on a first date; I couldn't enjoy anything!

The waiter was giving me weird looks. What were they thinking about? Did they know something I didn't? Or was it just the sweat? I mean illumination. Ade was still talking but nothing was getting through. I'd completely lost track of what was happening. Should I smile? Gaze into his eyes, like I was so fascinated I was going to cum? Or maybe I should eat. That could break the tension. Shoving a large chunk of beef into my carefully painted lips would make me seem ladylike. I couldn't play with my hair; it's too obvious. I couldn't swirl my wine; it's too cliché. If I laughed he'd think I'm a liar. If I looked interested, I'm bored. So if there was no way out then the very least I could do is stop sweating, but I couldn't even pull that off!

“Why do you always include the most boring and mundane aspects of whatever story you're telling?” Dawn moaned, clicking violently through the channels.

“What do you care? You're not even listening,” I bitched back, grabbing the remote away from him.

“You're sweating, slash crumpling swan napkins, while analyzing mealtime and first date propaganda,” he snapped, swiping the remote out of my hands before I could sit on it. “So seeing as how I've been listening: spare my ears the noise and just give me the notes.”

“Fuck you,” I laughed, after a brief and intense moment spent staring at Dawn’s widened, and supposedly infuriated eyes. On rare occasions I actually enjoyed his peevish humor. He cracked a smile and began to gently click through the channels, as I continued my rendition of first date blues.

“You’re awfully quiet tonight; is everything alright?” Ade asked as he leaned towards me, the candlelight flashing off of his blatantly expensive tie, even more than his blatantly expensive teeth.

“No, everything’s fine,” I stated reassuringly. “I’m just a little nervous.”

He gave a reassuring smile again, the number of which was growing too high to count. I needed to do something more than fuck up. I had to be interesting because it’s never enough just to be interested. I could tell Ade was becoming frustrated and who could blame him. Nobody likes to be stonewalled on a first date. But given that I hadn’t been in a relationship since I was with April I had reason enough to be cautious... paranoid... scared out of my mind.

“Skip the ‘coaxing the rabbit out of the hole’ shit,” Dawn whined, changing back and forth between a few channels during the commercial break.

“You’re getting the whole story, so shut up already!” I yelled, playing along with his obstinate temperament, as he slunk down into his couch shooting me a glare of flustered amusement.

“So, tell me about you. I’ve done nothing but talk all night,” Ade inquired, wrapping his lips around some mascarpone mashed potatoes. We sat in a trendy, overpriced, personification of status restaurant that in any other situation I’d have felt completely at home in. Ade had met me in the park, not too far away from where I worked, and walked with me to our meal. Imagine a spy being interrogated for information and you’ll have some vague conception of how anal I was being about giving out details. The nauseating guilt, of having to keep myself from someone I wanted to love, pulsed through me with every word. I hated lying—especially when it was necessary.

“What did you want to know?” I asked, trying to remain in a position that didn’t make me look like I had weight on my shoulders.

“Anything... everything really,” he exclaimed, tilting his wine glass back just enough to wet his lips.

“I don’t know where to start.”

“Just say the first thing that comes to mind.”

“My father was a lawyer and we didn’t get along,” I blurted out, taking his advice to ‘say the first thing that comes to mind’ literally.

“Umm... Ok,” Ade chuckled, breaking the awkward silences that had previously dominated the date.

“I’m sorry, I just got to thinking about that when you said your secretary was bulimic,” I stated, trying to smooth out my foot-in-mouth-moment.

“Well... is that going to be a problem?” he asked, still grinning widely.

“No, not at all; I just said the first thing that came to mind.”

“Alright, then, we’ll build off of that,” he exclaimed, placing his forearms on the table. “Why didn’t you get along with him?”

“He didn’t agree with a lot of my choices in life. Neither did my mother for that matter.”

“What kind of choices?” he asked, causing me to shudder lightly as I pushed away the truth and thought of a way to deter the question.

“Pretty much every choice.”

“Well that’s too bad,” he sighed, solemnly looking into his food, absent of appetite. ‘Oh, fuck it’ I thought as I uncrossed my tongue to say something of substance.

“He practically disowned me after I moved out,” I explained, having substituted ‘moved out’ for ‘sex change.’ “And that pretty much ended any relationship that we had,” I remarked, as he looked up at me once more with a new shine in his eyes.

“Have you tried to patch things up at all?”

“No, he’s dead. And I don’t really talk to my mother; or that’s to say that when I do she doesn’t listen” I said, my voice becoming horse not from sorrow, but the lack thereof.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” he said, placing his hand atop mine. I blushed and tried not to fidget. His hand was warm and gave me the distinct impression that he wasn’t going to stop asking about me—that he really wanted to know.

“What about your parents?” I asked, trying to avoid any further reference to my family.

“I can’t say it’s much better,” he muttered, as he leaned back into his chair, lifting his hand from mine. “My mother died when I was younger.

And as for my father,” he stated, coming to a brief pause as he stared forward, searching for words. His face assumed a grief stricken sternness that I hadn’t anticipated. Offput, I lost sight of anxiety and curiosity took the wheel. “Well I’ll just say that after her death we kind of drifted apart.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said, placing my hand atop his, to lighten the moment by mimicking what he had done. He smiled and turned his hand over to rub mine with his thumb. I blushed a little more and touched my chin to the spaghetti strap brace of my dress, running along my exposed shoulder.

“So other than that, how are things going with your life?” he asked, broadening the scope of his questions so that he could continue to get some answers out of me.

I paused and leaned in slowly towards him, opening my mouth just enough to break the seal of my lips. “Yeah, everything’s going very well,” I exclaimed, thinking about the whole picture for the first time in a while.

“Seriously, what the hell’s the point of this? Doesn’t anything happen on this date?” Dawn bitched, tossing back and forth in his seat, eagerly awaiting the commercial’s end so that he could start ignoring me again.

I snarled lightly at his insolence, and tucked my whip-like tongue back into my mouth to say quite politely to him, “Dawn, I’m going to sit here and blather on about whatever the fuck I want, so that I can feel like someone cares enough to hear it. And all you have to do is sit there and pretend to listen.”

After I said that Dawn burst into laughter. I remained motionless waiting for his blissful tantrum to lessen. Eventually he came to a close, holding his stomach with one hand and rubbing away half a tear with the

other. He looked me up and down to see if I was insulted, eventually concluding that he could continue being a dick. “Well as long as we’re on the same page,” he said, turning up the volume on the TV.

“So, anyway,” I groaned, rolling my eyes to look at the TV as well. “We talked about our parents for a little while, which was good because we could relate to how much each of ours sucked.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And then he told me a little about his practice and a few of his friends...”

“You don’t say.”

“And you know his friends seemed really nice and I think I’m going to get a chance to meet them in a week or so when they’re in town...”

“Yeah I hear they’re good this time of year,” Dawn blurted out, making it abundantly clear that he was just throwing out random sayings to keep with the façade of his attention. I checked my need to tell someone about how the date had gone, and for a brief moment wished that Mark and Tim hadn’t gone on a hitchhiking vacation to Canada. But as my focus came back to Dawn, I said “fuck it” and stood up to leave. “What’s wrong?” he asked, tilting his head to the side to see if I was going.

“I think I’m gonna try and talk to Lillie,” I said, buttoning up my forest green coat that fell to the top of my knee-high, black leather, boots. At this Dawn stood up to see me to the door, since he was always courteous when he was afraid he’d insulted me. He put his hand on the back of my right shoulder and strutted on my left side, even though no one else was around. I felt a little comforted by it and knew that I was getting the real him; even though, at face value, it was a precautionary measure to keep my friendship.

“Ade sounds like a really nice guy,” he stated cheerfully, as I tried to fight off the arm wrapped around me, pulling me steadily closer to him.

“Don’t kiss my ass Dawn,” I muttered, giving into his physical affections but remaining pissy so that he’d keep being nice.

“I’m serious!” Dawn cried, drawing my eyes up to his as he stretched his arm out and grasped the door handle. “I mean compared to some of the assholes you’ve been stuck with, he’s the fucking pope.”

“They weren’t that bad,” I said quietly, thinking of nothing but what a lie it was, and how I had no dignity to save.

“Yeah, bullshit,” he exclaimed bluntly. “Remember that one guy who bought you knee pads and anal lube on your first date?”

“Fine, I lied. But you still don’t know if Ade’s any better; you weren’t even listening to me!” I bitched, stepping to the open side of the door when Dawn drew away so that we could face each other.

“We both know I can’t do that gossipy crap,” he stated, giving me an earnest look. “And as for Ade, who gives a shit if I know he’s any better or not? I’m agreeing with you so stop whining. Just go talk to Lillie and thank me for the support.”

I squinted for a moment, trying to catch a smile shriveling up on Dawn’s cheek, but I lost my chance when he noticed my intentions. He scowled for a second, shifted his weight and then swallowed; all the while waiting for me to say something. “Well?” he said irritably, lightly shaking his head. I raised my right hand for a moment, hesitating just enough to bring his attention down to it. At that moment I thrust my arm forward and wrapped it around his back, pulling him towards me.

“Thanks Dawn!” I blurted out, overly hugging him in my fit of sarcastic bliss. He held me for a second, pondering if I were sincere, but

grabbed my ass (just in case) as a way to get me off of him. I squeezed my cheeks together and went onto my tiptoes as he nudged me out the door. I laughed at him when he mashed his lips together, bringing the door to a close; but only so quickly for him to get the last words in to wish me, “good luck with Lillie.”

I walked, heavy-headed, to the elevator; taking note of myself in a nearby mirror. My hair was tied up in a bun behind my head; tangled and poking out in places to give it that bed-head flare. A few chopsticks were stabbed through it that I’d saved from a meal consumed before I’d attended Dawn’s wallet-mutilating-dining-experience. My makeup was respectful; which by my standards, and more important Lillie’s, was borderline non-existent. I smiled and it shone genuinely—something more than just the whitener.

Chapter 15

“Lillie, I’m sorry,” I stated, trying to pinpoint the right spin on it so that he wouldn’t think it contrived.

“What?” the cabby asked, turning his head to the side, to give me a disapproving look, as we scoured Queens for a queen.

“Nothing,” I muttered, looking out the window to see Lillie’s house go by. “This is it!” I cried, starting to open the door before we came to a stop. I shelled out my hard earned money and pulled a 180 to stand petrified on the side of the sidewalk. My excitement melted away as all the heartache, back-break and mistake came flooding back to me. For a second I felt like fainting but I forcefully/anxiously plodded forward; tenaciously determined to win Lillie back.

I lifted my shaking hand up to his thick wood door and inhaled. But something happened and my arm went limp. “Fuck,” I muttered, shaking my head back and forth, trying to build up the courage to come crawling back. I took a deep breath, bobbing up and down on my heels, starring up at nothing. I thought about how stupid I was and how Lillie would be happy to see how I’d changed. But doubt controlled me. I recited a few parts of the speech I’d been preparing to plead. About how I’d been so selfish, and all I wanted was his friendship. About how I’d cleaned up everything in my life for him, for my friends. About, about a million other things that I couldn’t work up the nerve to say because I was too much of a fucking coward to even knock on

his door. Then I exhaled everything in my lungs and regurgitated the same crap doubts, as I stood motionless on his doorstep, surrounded by darkness.

My eyes drifted down to the doorknob when I heard a lock click and a creak in the floorboards. I raised my arms up in fear; looking frantically from side to side for a place to hide but there was nothing in sight, and I was left waiting. A moment later the door pulled open to expose Lillie standing on the other side giving me one of his textbook ‘you’re a dumb ass’ looks. I stood with my feet planted tightly together and eyes inflated with oncoming tears from just one of the emotions crammed into me. And then there was silence. We stared at each other. Him waiting for me to talk because I’d come to his house, and me waiting for him to talk because he should have known I was too much of a pussy to say anything. He squinted more than he had been squinting, which I might add may not have been at all, as I was too caught up thinking about my thinking about what to say, to actually say anything. Then in a nervous fluster my mouth opened to say something just as Lillie closed his door.

I stood still trying to figure out if I’d already blown it. Only this time I was confused about something other than my motives. I glanced from my left to my right without moving my head as though it were all a joke, but I wasn’t laughing and from what I could tell by the front of Lillie’s door, neither was he. A gust of wind hit me from behind and I thought about how I should have worn panties. I closed my mouth, frowned at the peephole and began to make a left turn only to hear Lillie’s voice come from the other side of the closed door.

“All you have to do is knock, Joan!” he yelled, muffled by the door.

“What?” I asked, trying to set a place to gaze upon while talking.

“Knock! Don’t stand there like an idiot! Don’t go right into whatever it is you came to say! Just fucking knock!”

“Why don’t you just open the door?”

“Why don’t you just knock?”

“Because you already know I’m here!” I cried, rolling my eyes and letting my arms droop lifelessly.

“That’s not the point!”

“Then what is the point Lillie? Cause I can’t see it! All I can see is your Goddamn door!” I yelled, immediately after which the door opened and Lillie took a bold step towards me. I swallowed any reaction but reverence, hoping he knew how to make it all better.

“The point is that I’m not the one who’s going to take the first step here. I’m not the one who’s sorry or who needs to kiss ass. I shouldn’t have to have opened this door before you came to it, but I did because I want what you want every bit as much as you do,” he said, just inches away from my wavering expression. Lillie then took a step back and slammed the door. I dropped my scared face and strapped on my dumbfounded one while I focused on the floor. My hand twitched as I pulled it slowly to my waist and then quickly up. I knocked three times on his dark green, wood door and waited. There was a bit of commotion inside as Lillie fidgeted with the lock but he emerged eventually; this time letting go of the knob to stand before me. There was another long silence, only now neither Lillie nor myself retreated from it. We soaked it in, mentally running through all of the things we wanted to say to each other about how much we’d missed one another. But before any of that Lillie needed closure, which meant I needed to explain, which meant we had a lot of catching up to do.

“I don’t want to hear how sorry you are, that’s obvious.” Lillie said, as he fished around in his freezer while I sat uneasily on his couch, trying to understand how I felt. “I don’t even want to hear about how you feel,

because I pretty much have that one figured out,” he explained, now in a drawer grabbing a couple of spoons. “All I want is to know what the fuck you’ve been up to since this all started and where you stand today,” he stated, now standing in front of me with his arm stretched out, offering a container of Haagen-Dazs.

“Where do I start?”

“I don’t know. Where did you start?” he asked, plopping himself down onto the other side of his couch. I sighed, rolled my eyes into the back of my head and dictated my thoughts to Lillie as they came to me. I talked about how Mark and Tim had helped me. About how I’d gone through steps, how I’d gotten a job, started a new relationship, and pulled myself together. Then after a container of ice cream, two re-runs of ‘Sex and The City,’ and a couple of side-tracked conversations I had completely filled Lillie in. Right up to my date with Ade that is.

“You were trying to talk to Dawn about this?” Lillie said, half shocked, half amused.

“I know. But that’s the sort of thing I’ve been reduced to since all of this started,” I sighed, gazing into Lillie’s warm eyes, comforted by them and overjoyed to see him again.

“So anyway, tell me more about your date with Ade,” he said, diving into the corners of the ice cream container to hunt down the residue.

“Well...” I stated, looking up as I rewound my memory to the date.

“So tell me about your friends; I’ve done enough badmouthing,” Ade exclaimed as we took a stroll through the park. My heels clip-clopped as we walked, reminding me of a horse’s trot. The moon was half concealed by trees, swaying in the wind. The bums were all tucked in behind their bushes

and the streetlight illuminated our steps. I felt romance for the first time since April, and it was great

“I don’t know. My friends are kind of strange,” I explained, watching my unpainted toenails between the straps of my heels as we walked, bumping elbows every other step.

“So what?”

“So, I’m afraid you’ll think less of me because of them,” I exclaimed, half joking and half concerned.

“I’ll assume you were just trying to be cute,” Lillie stated grimly, staring at me without expression. I chuckled lightly, sliding my tongue along the tips of my upper teeth before I continued talking.

“Come on, they can’t be that bad.”

“Ok,” I muttered, digging into my mind to try and fish out the things I could tell and what I’d have to keep keeping secret. “Well there’s Dawn. He’s my oldest friend; I guess I’ve known him for about...” I said, concentrating on the math, but giving up half way. “Well since I was thirteen. Anyway he’s... uh... well he’s a nymphomaniac and... um... narcissistic,” I stated, spouting out the first things that came to mind, while watching Ade’s unintentional grin twitch back and forth with his effort to restrain it. “We both attended this crappy private school that our parents forced us into and we’ve sort of grown together.”

“So, is he the one dating Donata?” he asked as he stepped wide on the path to avoid an oncoming couple collision.

“Yeah, that bitch,” I groaned. “But they’re not really dating. More just fucking... Dawn could never maintain a relationship.”

“Ok, so whom else should I know about?”

“There’s Lillie. I’ve known him for about nine years now,” I explained, thinking about how I’d met Lillie at a drag show and how I’d have to come up with a lie close enough to that so I wouldn’t slip up. “I met him at a gay pride parade that another friend of mine, Mark, was attending and wanted me to come along,” I said, happy that I had hit two birds with one stone because I really had met Mark at a gay pride parade.

“And Mark is?”

“I’ve known him for about seven years now. I actually introduced him to his current lover, another friend of mine Tim.”

“And how do you know him?”

“He lived in the park for a while and we’d always have a talk when I’d go running.”

“So... is he homeless then?”

“Kind of,” I muttered, trying to pigeonhole Tim’s lifestyle choices. “He lives on the street but it’s not because he’s a bum or anything... I guess you could call him a drifter or minimalist... he just rejects the notion of possessions. He’s actually pretty well-educated and if you talk to him you’d be surprised that he lives the way he does,” I explained quickly, feeling as though I needed to justify each of my friends. “But I don’t know, we never really saw eye to eye on a lot of that stuff.”

“Hold on,” Lillie blurted out, promptly interrupting me.

“What?”

“Have you told him you’re a transsexual?”

“No,” I said, gulping hard.

“And exactly when were you planning on telling him?”

“Fuck’s sake Lillie; do you honestly think I’d ever get a date if I went around telling people I used to have a dick?” I exclaimed defensively.

“Joan, you shouldn’t lie to him. You’ll just end up getting hurt,” he said, giving me a pitiful look. I chose not to respond to his words and instead slipped back to my comforting, nostalgic denial.

“And then there’s April,” I sighed, watching my feet.

“How do you know her?”

“I met April when she was at work about 6 years ago,” I stated, trying not to think of emotion or feel my thoughts.

“What does she do?” Ade asked, as I had temporarily stopped talking.

“Oh... She works in a store that’s similar to mine. Although she’s gotten a promotion since I met her and now she works closely with management,” I grumbled as nicely as possible; thinking of Stacy, my redheaded she-devil boss; and how she was probably fucking April at the moment. “We actually used to date... But that fell apart and now we’re just friends.”

“Oh,” Ade exclaimed, somewhat surprised that I had told him I’d dated another woman.

“Is... that... a problem?” I asked, not really knowing how to respond as the people I frequently associated with were either gay, really gay, queens or Dawn.

“No, that’s fine,” he said reassuringly, walking closer to me now.

“So blah blah blah... We talked some more and got along really well,” I explained to Lillie as he sat cross-legged, facing me on his couch. “Then, after he walked me home, there was the obligatory awkward posturing and stuff before he kissed me goodnight.”

“Wait,” Lillie interrupted. “Don’t just crap out on the details because it’s intimate. You’re telling me the way it happened,” he exclaimed, laying down the gossipy relationship law.

“Fine,” I said, rolling my eyes playfully, since Lillie knew quite well that I enjoyed this sort of thing.

“Nice neighborhood,” Ade commented, as we now stood under the glistening streetlight around the corner of my apartment. It was quiet out, which would normally make me afraid of people listening in. But this time I almost wanted them to—to look over and see not only a wonderful man, but his interest in me and, thus, a very happy woman.

“Thanks,” I said, shifting my weight for the thirtieth time, desperately trying to come up with some sort of nonverbal way of telling him to kiss me.

“So...” he sighed, a light smirk curling up with his hands as he now took mine. “Thank you very much for tonight, I had a wonderful time,” he stated, pulling my hands gently up to waist level while focusing intensely on

my eyes. “And incase you’re wondering why I’m about to close my eyes and lean forward, it’s because I’m going to try and kiss you goodnight,” he said, softly sliding his hands to grasp me by the waist. My smile faded to a kiss as I lost sight and indulged in the moment. I thought of how wonderful it was and how great it felt. But naturally it didn’t last, and my thoughts of happiness only triggered worry and fear. I focused on how I was lying, how I didn’t deserve to feel this way and on the inevitable rejection. I winced a little as Ade gradually pulled away from me, leaving the awful wet-crackling noise that you couldn’t stand if it came from anything other than a kiss. I opened my eyes slowly, so as not to reflect upon my suspicion that I had soured the kiss. He smiled, and I was content. Then we said goodnight and I went upstairs to lie in bed; thinking of how I should be thinking of sleeping, but rather only of Ade.

Lillie stared at his foot for a moment and I got the impression that he was going to put it in his mouth. I looked at him, waiting for him to speak as I had done my fair share and eventually he got the point.

“I’m not going to bother lecturing you Joan, because you know what you should do,” he exclaimed, gradually pulling his eyes up to meet mine. “I’ll just say that I’m happy for you. And I hope that everything turns out for the best.”

I stared at him for a moment wanting to tell him that things were different, that Ade was different, but I crapped out and admitted my fears. I am a woman, but Ade wouldn’t see it that way. No one would see it that way. To them my gender, my identity, would always be a choice and a lie; something that I did, for some stupid reason, that only someone crazy enough to do it could comprehend. And then I felt angry and frustrated. I felt as though even my friends didn’t understand, and they still saw me as nothing

more than a hopelessly hopeless romantic—a love struck fool, bent on my own misery. Death, taxes, and the certainty that you're either a man or a woman—clear as mud.

“Thanks,” I sputtered out, crossing my will to speak with my need to feel. Lillie gave me a fake smile to match my fake reply and we looked away from each other to avoid the truth.

Chapter 16

Breathe in deeply—brace for impact.

I stood in the entranceway to a large room packed full of new age, yoga, lesbian types and I felt a little offput. I was wearing sneakers, sweats, minimal makeup, and a pink t-shirt with an emblem of the Pink Panther eating, and eating out, the Easter bunny. I scanned the room, glancing from one thin, bendy person to the next. People smiling, laughing and pushing themselves to within a degree of fracturing. Eventually my eyes came to rest on April's shimmering hair. She was in a downward-facing-dog position and looked fantastic. I felt the sweat start coming, the goose bumps creeping up, and my breath growing shorter by the gasp. I thought of what I'd rehearsed, of everything that'd happened and how much I needed this to go well. I recalled loving April, holding her, losing her and now trying to win back her friendship to the inevitable end of whatever.

Exhale.

“Excuse me,” a bone thin woman said while placing her palm on my shoulder, walking past me as I was blocking the entrance.

“Oh I'm sorry,” I sputtered, coming back to reality.

“Are you new?” she asked politely.

“Yeah,” I said, still fixated on April.

“Well you can grab a mat and set up anywhere, the class will begin in a few minutes.”

“Ok...thanks,” I replied, glancing around the room until I eventually saw where the mats were. I walked over, trying not to bring too much attention to myself in the process, and picked up a mat. I then proceeded to stride softly past every woman in the place until I stood before April.

Breathe in really deeply.

I saw her back muscles start to unbuckle as she returned to face upward and gaze upon me, frozen in front of her. Her eyes widened and her pupils sucked in along side of her lips, which became the focal point of her face as they remained still. She came to rest on her knees, with her arms drooping down, causing her to lose her balance. I however stood still; seemingly strong and without hesitation in my blatantly hidden awkward posturing. My legs started to quiver and my body shook. But in the end I pushed past the built up phlegm, emotions, and residual smoke to sputter out what I had waited so long to say.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” she replied, equally as softly as I had managed.

“How are you?” I asked, losing ear of the constant exaggerated breathing surrounding us.

“I’m well, and yourself?”

“Well as well,” I stated. A brief, yet eternally long, pause following my words.

“So... did you... manage to clean up at all?” April stuttered, rethinking every word before and after she said them.

“Yeah I did. I got in shape and everything,” I exclaimed, some what surprised that April hadn’t noticed my reform via my appearance.

“Yeah, you look great, I was just gonna say but... well I’m just surprised,” she sighed, sluggishly turning her feet around so that she now sat crossed legged on her mat.

“I know,” I replied, sitting down on my mat in front of her. “Is it ok that I came to see you?”

“Of course, I just hadn’t expected it to be here or now. But I’m happy that you’re here and that you’re looking so much better,” she said, a smile starting to appear as she came out of shock and accepted me back.

“And I’m glad to be here,” I stated, matching her smile. “So what’s new with you?” I asked cheerfully, trying to come off as though everything was behind us and we could finally start anew.

“Well...” she started, pausing while she stared upward scanning her memory. “I’m getting the chance to manage the new store opening up. My little sister’s engaged, I purchased my apartment and...” she said, coming to a stop when her eyes looked over me, watching something approach. “And then there’s Stacy,” she exclaimed, her eyes now focused just over my left shoulder.

“What’s that sweetie?” I heard a voice say from behind me. I turned around and sure enough it was my red headed bitch of a boss, staring down at me. “Oh, hi Joh-oan, I didn’t see you,” Stacy groaned, breaking eye contact with me half way through her sentence; choosing to stare off into space

instead. I almost broke off her leg from the knee down to use as a stake to kill that vampire whore, but instead I just sort of made a clicking noise and winced. And to make it worse she almost called me John! I mean what the fuck was that? She knew perfectly well what my name is, and she was just pushing me by saying anything else!

“Hey boss,” I muttered, taking note of April’s averted gaze. I could only assume she assumed me ignorant of her relationship with Stacy. I saw her running over how to tell me: she had secretly helped me recover, how I hadn’t really done it all on my own and that despite her knowledge of my reform she had not contacted me. But she swallowed any unprovoked explanation as I hadn’t shown surprise. I turned my focus back to Stacy, who was firing me a contemptuous glare due to my attention paid to April. Stacy was threatened by me.

“I got you a mat,” April announced, trying to get us to stop sneering at each other. Stacy shifted her focus and gleefully said, “Thank you,” while I squeezed my jaw, out of pent up frustration, eventually turning away from Stacy so as not to explode.

“So what brings you here Joan?” Stacy asked, kneeling on her mat.

“I came to see April,” I replied, fighting desperately to keep my tongue holstered.

“So I guess that means you finally cleaned yourself up,” Stacy exclaimed, coming off of her knees to rest on a high horse.

“Yeah, all better now.”

“She really looks great,” April said, jumping in to add something positive to our face off. Her eyes darted between the floor and me. The kind of eye contact you’d expect from a guilty child. I could tell seeing me again was tearing her up... I shouldn’t have been so bold.

“Uh huh,” Stacy replied, a grin cracking as the sarcasm rolled off of her snake tongue.

“So are you a beginner then Stacy?” I asked, dropping my distaste for Stacy out of concern for April.

“No I’ve been coming in for years now,” she answered snidely. “It’s a great work out and a good place to meet women.”

“So is this where you two met?” I asked, glancing back and forth between April and Stacy; good and evil.

“No, I run a chain of stores and April manages one of them. Plus she helps out a lot with new employees,” she stated, making it abundantly clear that my position was a result of April’s influence. After all, why would someone who hated me so much keep me on staff? But at the same time, her distaste for me was likely derived from my relationship with April. So for the time being, we’re stuck together.

“All right ladies! Everybody on your feet!” the instructor exclaimed, bringing our conversation to a screeching halt.

Exhale.

It continued on like that for the rest of the class. Stacy and I would frequently glare back and forth at one another, past April, who sat in between us. I don’t think I’d ever gotten so riled up at a yoga class before. I don’t know if it was jealousy or good old-fashioned contempt, but I could focus on nothing more than releasing April from the hell that was Stacy. When the class wrapped up I was left with a faint sweat, as I tried to remain confident in my relationship with April.

Stacy and April stood up in unison and we all exited the room together. After a brisk trip to the changing room (where I was always self-conscious), I bumped into them on their way out. Stacy was now wearing a leather jacket, suiting for her overbearing, dominatrix personality. April had on a pink-knit sweater and a pair of off-white, capri pants. Her youthful, plump, cheeks were rosy from the workout. Her hair fell long and free, and for a fleeting moment I could focus my energy positively on April, without the distraction of—“So where are you headed now Joan?” Stacy asked reluctantly, as I walked with them to their car.

“I’m going to run a few errands,” I replied, seeing that April was twisting Stacy’s arm to give me a lift.

“Oh, I’d give you a ride but we’re kind of in a hurry,” she stated, arriving at a black Mercedes convertible, tossing her bag in the back seat.

“Uh huh,” I replied, trying to match the sarcasm that she had been frequently throwing in my face. Stacy made a sour expression and slid into the driver’s seat of her car. April walked around it to stand before me, smiling as though there were no tension, no awkwardness or feelings of angst but rather bliss; the intentionally naïve way that she always chose to see things that frustrated me more than anything.

“It was great to see you again,” she exclaimed, spreading her arms wide as she wrapped them around me. She squeezed me in, as though to doubly re-assure me that everything was all right, and then released just as quickly. I smiled and said the same as she had said to me. “So anyway, Stacy and I are going to be having a dinner party in a few weeks. I’d love it if you could come,” she stated, my glance slipping from April to see the horror on Stacy’s face.

“I’d love to,” I replied grinning, as Stacy glared angrily at me.

“Great,” April squealed, almost hopping when I agreed. She then walked back around to the other side of the car to join her lesser half, and I watched them drive away as quickly as possible. I stood there for a moment, caught in my moment of standing but eventually got bored and walked to the bus stop. When I arrived I sat down, plopping my now firm, fit ass onto the bench, to judge passers-by. I put my life into perspective and felt warm. A certain contentment crept up on me and I chuckled lightly, only somewhat from the class of young children walking by that you could easily stereotype at first sight: the future gay one, the porn star, the Ivy League, and the loser. But then I saw a gleeful, little boy with straight black hair reminiscent of my own, and I drew a blank.

Breathe in very fucking deeply.

Chapter 17

I hate my favorite pizza place. You'd walk in to smell the thick grease tainted air that makes you gag if you haven't eaten a bucket of chicken in less than 24 hours. The walls are faded from age, splattered sauce, toppings, and whatever crap happens to fly off of the customers. The only cleaning ever done is when word of a health inspector gets around. The calories per slice are more than the year in which we live and, despite all of this, I wouldn't have wanted to be anywhere else. Although that might have had something to do with the lovely man sitting across from me, wiping half a pint of pizza ooze off of his face.

"This is such a love-hate relationship," Ade exclaimed, cautiously raising a piece of pizza to his mouth.

"It can't be too debatable, you're on your fourth slice," I replied, checking to see if a chunk of sausage had legs.

"Yeah well, absolute hunger corrupts absolutely," he stated, making a pleased face as a result of either my chuckling, the pizza, or both.

"Do you think we'll still have time to make the movie?"

"Doesn't matter, I'm not terribly thrilled about seeing the next installment of whatever generic horror flick this is."

"Hey! It got good reviews," I snapped playfully.

“Yeah, but how do I know the reviewer’s credible? It could be some teenage movie buff writing from his basement or, even worse, one of the producers.”

“True, but if you’d listened to what I said you’d know it got good ‘reviews’ as in more than one,” I said in a sassy voice, trying to get him riled up so that we could build off of one another’s reactions.

“My most sincere apologies.”

“Accepted... but seriously we need to get going if we’re going to make it,” I nagged, continually glancing at the pizza place’s clock.

“Alright, if it means that much to you I suppose I can give my arteries a break,” Ade muttered, putting down the remnants of a cheese fried crust. We then proceeded to stand up and scrape whatever was left of our meal from our faces. He held the door for me as we tried to exit gracefully—not noticing, and failing to mention to each other, the stains that were left upon us.

We walked steadily to the theater, despite my incisive need to hurry the hell up. I snuggled up against his side while holding his hand, milking the time for all it was worth since, with Ade such a luxury was more than rare. I had been courting him for a few weeks, even though we had only gotten a chance to go on three dates. However, our constant phone conversing birthed a rapidly developing bond that, save the obscurity of our time together, was wonderful—although we still hadn’t fucked and I was getting really horny/frisky/impatient... and Goddamn it all I wanted was to get laid!

“Well that sucks,” I muttered, staring uneasily at the big white sign that said cancelled.

“So, now what do you want to do?” Ade asked, making the same expression as me while we stood side by side in front of the movie theatre.

“I don’t know,” I replied, turning to face him.

“Well...” he sighed, as we gravitated to the middle of the sidewalk, with people brushing past us on every side.

“Yeah...” I mumbled, equally as perplexed. A few moments went by consisting of Ade making a low-browed expression while he stared into nothing, searching for an epiphany. I tapped my fingers on my hip, increasing the speed along with my impatience. I watched the curves of his face, his weight shift from one side to the other and his hand twitch in his pocket. I felt a light fluster and then my mouth start to dry. My pupils widened as I turned away from the gleam of the movie sign and I stepped closer to Ade so that people would stop skimming by me.

“Do you just wanna go to my place?” I asked somewhat hesitantly, pausing mid-sentence when I momentarily let logic intrude on my sexual urge. Ade ticked his head back a notch, but slid it forward to its normal position to give me a slick and reassuring smile. I returned mimicked his expression and we hailed a cab to avoid the tedious, sexual build up of walking there.

The ride to my place was something of a giggling dignity. We kept quiet, nestled immediately beside each other. His hand rested atop my knee. My hip pressed up against his. I wanted to be sexy; to adhere to the spaghetti thong, high heeled, red lipstick, hip swinging, runway personification. The female formula for desirable—one part whore, two parts class, add a twist of allure and garnish with suggestive sass. Romanced, not skewered.

Ade made a surprised face when we pulled up to my building. Since he had only been in my neighborhood before, he hadn’t expected me to own

the crème de la crème of apartments. We climbed out of the cab, with him holding my hand gently. The muffler rattled, and the cab sped away while we stepped up to my front door. I led him upstairs until I reached my door, trying to unlock it slowly so that I wouldn't come off as desperate. I eloquently pushed it open, trying to make it seem as though I wanted to gaze upon my recently glazed nails. He followed me in, pausing once inside, to look around and get the feel of my place. I tossed my keys on a side table, and watched it wobble briefly before I turned to speak to Ade.

“Would you like something to drink?” I asked, moving towards the fridge.

“No thank you,” he replied cheerily. There was a brief pause in speech as I stuck my head into the fridge to try and find something to my liking. Ade paced in my living room, examining my place and everything I had lying around. “I hope you don't mind my asking but how do you afford this place?”

I swallowed hard and cleared my throat as I dug deeper into the fridge, being only a little offput by Ade's question. “I received a large portion of an inheritance when my grandfather passed away. I purchased the apartment with it,” I stated, pulling out a Diet Coke from behind a chicken wrapped in tinfoil.

“Oh.”

“And the furniture doesn't fit because I was robbed a ways back,” I explained, taking the initiative to clear up certain aspects of my shady past.

“But how could that happen in a building like this? Aren't there security guards?” he asked, moving towards my banister littered with pictures.

“The door man was in on it, I think... I don't know really, I didn't ask a lot of questions.”

“Didn't your insurance cover what was taken?”

“Yes,” I sighed, realizing that once you started explaining things you had to stick with it. “And that's what I've lived off for the last couple years... until recently, I had been unemployed.”

“Oh,” he mumbled, unsure how to take it.

“It's just one of those hard times in my life that I'm happy to be done with,” I explained, slapping on a phony smile to make things seem better than they were.

“Everybody has those,” he stated, refraining from any further questions, as it was obvious I was uncomfortable. An awkward pause followed that I broke by informing him of who the people in the pictures were. I pointed from my escapades with Dawn, to my family endeavors, trying to leave out the important things so that I wouldn't get caught. He made fascinated noises, and little chuckles as I dove into only partially contrived details. But after the pictures ended I was left looking at Ade, trying to explain it to myself. His eyes started to close, and I knew that he was going to kiss me. It made me feel a little sick and I was fortunate that he couldn't see my distraught face. But then I silenced doubt and kissed him; forgetting once again that anything could possibly go wrong.

It turned into passionate kissing, largely due to my influence. As we paced into one another, I tried to lead Ade to the bedroom. We bumped into a few walls, and opened a few wrong doors, but eventually we got there. I backed him up in a kissing frenzy until we fell onto my bed. From there it slowed down, the gear shifting to more of a romantic-let's-fuck tone. His hands glided about me lifting the side of my shirt enough to fondle my love

handles, which I had finally gotten under control. I massaged his shoulders, wide and prominent, as we rolled to the side so that he was now on top of me. He placed his weight on his right knee so that he could undress me without the trouble of getting up or ceasing his kissing. I pulled at his shirt, eventually thrusting it upward and over his head. His body glistened in the streetlight, shining from the window. He momentarily rose from me, only to take my top with him and cast it aside.

He leaned back into me, his lips hovering over my navel with his breath creating a steamy heat as it moved upward towards my neck. His hand, that was free from support, wrapped around my side and pulled me lightly up. I arched my back to comply and he slowly undid the zipper of my skirt. I tightly grasped his back muscles, feeling goose bumps spring up from his sensually ticklish touch. A faint sweat had begun to build, warming me to him as he now lay directly atop me. I slid my hand from his back, to come to his belt. I undid it slowly, letting it unravel on its own after the seal was broken. I then unzipped his pants and pushed them downward, leaving one hand to grasp the elastic of his boxers. I slipped two fingers inside of them and followed their hold of his hip until I reached his ass, removing them once there.

He grabbed on to my ribs and pulled me up as he swayed back to rest on his knees. I extended my legs, and wrapped them around him, now resting atop his crotch. His tongue lightly caressed my neck while one of his hands began to undo my bra. After he had it off, he shifted me around so that I was now facing away from him, keeping his tongue on my neck during the maneuver. His hand then came to rest on my breast while the other continued downward, drawing my panties away with it. The Victoria's Secret lingerie brushed against my legs and caught on my heels when it reached my feet. I then rubbed my legs onto Ade's, pushing off his pants and dangling underwear in doing so. My breath quickened as I felt the initial touch of

Ade's hand to my clit. He rubbed his fingertips, gently back and forth while I arched my back from the stimulation, digging my ass into his lap.

I leaned my neck to the side, so that our tongues would meet. I felt him completely: his hand rubbing my now firm nipples, his growing erection and his fingers inside of me. I placed one of my hands on his leg to use as a base of support since I was growing weak from his touch. We moaned together and I swung around to gaze into his eyes focused intensely on me. He leaned forward for a moment to kiss me, with the ulterior motive of removing his socks. I smiled with our lips remaining pressed together, and then resumed the passion of the moment. I fell into him, causing him to lie back, with his legs drooped over the side of my bed. I reached down and played with his penis while thrusting my body into his. He made muffled sighs of satisfaction while rubbing my butt and leg. I then took his throbbing, hard dick and slid it into me. We opened our mouths in unison and exhaled on one another as we fell into a kiss.

I swung my hips around, varying the speed when I sat up to allow a greater range of motion. Ade dug the back of his head into the pillow, his lips trembling while I gently scratched through his chest hair. His eyes closed, and mine followed, as we concentrated on the motion and feeling. I could hear him breathing along with me, his hands resting on the sides of my hips while they pressed into him. I rocked back and forth, swaying my body the opposite of my hips, feeling him hard and strong inside of me. I felt pulsating fiery shivers as the streetlamp now illuminated the ever-increasing sweat dripping off of my body. I sped up and slowed down, the sheets becoming damp from our heat. Ade's hands rose to caress my breasts once again, moving in a circular motion simultaneously with my hips. He then sat up and pulled me around so that I would be in the very position he had been.

Extending his tongue, he lightly doused my chest and neck with saliva while penetrating me once more. My legs extended and my feet flexed as a result of his thrusting. I swayed back and forth, into and out of the mattress. I grabbed onto his triceps for support when they flexed, his arms acting as balancing beams for his body's continuous motion. I could hear him breathing deeply as my eyelids drifted shut, my eyes rolling back in the process. I pressed down on my brow, my mouth opening wide and then shutting, over and over again. Ade lowered his head until his nose pressed against mine and, once more, we could taste each other's warm breath. He kissed me and I leaned into him to accentuate his action. We held it for a moment until we both gasped for air and a quickening pace once more. Ade repositioned me again, this time so that I lay on my side with him behind me. I felt his hand clasp my arm with our wet bodies smacking against each other.

He pulled himself closer to me, speeding up as my breathing shifted to quick gasps and my thoughts to cumming. His arms wrapped around me, holding me tight to him while his pace continued to quicken. I mumbled to him that I was going to cum, and I could feel his breath change, as though he had meant to reply. His grasp remained tight and delicate as ever. His sensual caress kept me at ease as we reached a climax, breathing heavily outward and freezing in the moment. That intense, blissful orgasm that we had worked so hard for, and then there was silence. I turned lazily around, his hold of me releasing as his arms now lay limp around me. I faced him, his eyes closed until a sudden flutter of his lashes brought them back to life. He smiled at me, and I at him. His arms once again grew strong and they shifted to hold me as we came down from our high.

It was in that moment, after sex, that emotion rang true. He didn't go off on his own or try and get away from me now that we'd fucked. He stayed with me, as intently as every moment before. And I stared at him with a

growing love and awe that, save for April, I had never felt. I looked into his eyes, for the brief moment before sleep took us, and was content and joyful. I thought only of him, or that's to say my thoughts were of thinking only of him and not April. A moment later we pulled the covers over us and lay together until my Scooby Doo alarm clock ushered in the morning.

Chapter 18

“Should I call you tonight?” Ade asked, neatly packing a few pairs of black socks into the quintessential business suitcase.

“You can try, I don’t know when I’ll be back,” I replied, sliding on a formerly pressed pair of eggshell-colored dress pants.

I had gone over to Ade’s place to say goodbye before he left on a weeklong business trip. My intent being to only stay a short while and not fuck him before I attended April’s dinner party.

I had managed to see him, and get to know him, more than either one of us had imagined possible. On our one-month anniversary, he was able to go to dinner with me and postpone whatever the hell it is lawyers are always doing. He showed an interest in the things I liked rather than trying to convert me to his interests. He loved wine, food, dancing, and most importantly me. He had even instilled enough courage in me, to turn down Stacy’s generous offer of riding on our store’s float (in the gay pride parade) dressed as the left nut.

We had our disagreements and differences, as any two people in a heterosexual relationship will. But there was something about him that made me forget all of that. A comforting warmth, that radiated from his gaze, keeping me cheerful. What we had was more than a bar to reach with the word love scratched onto it. It was an ever-expanding unlimited range of

emotional landmines that, regardless of my past, I felt inclined to rush into. Fuck reservation, this was a relationship.

“Well, I’ll call and leave you the information of where you can reach me. That way you can give me a ring when you get in,” he stated, checking his tie in the mirror and zipping up his bag. I plopped down onto his mattress, so that I could do up my shirt. He turned around with an adoring smile and strutted over, placing his hands on my sides. Every time we touched I could feel my heart melt and the butterfly’s crapping in my stomach.

“Oh no you don’t!” I cried playfully, fending off his touch so that we wouldn’t get distracted fucking. “I’ve got a dinner to go to, and you’ve got a plane to catch.”

“I’ll catch the next one, and you’ll be fashionably late,” he said, leaning in past my feeble attempts to keep him at bay, kissing me long and slow. He gradually pulled back, my eyes remaining closed with my brows elevated. I smacked my lips together to gather his taste and then pulled myself together again.

“No, we’ll just have to put it off a little while,” I muttered, coming out of the kiss induced trance. “And it’s not fashionably late if I walk in half way through dessert, which we both know would happen,” I exclaimed, gliding my hand along his blazer, raising my eyes to look into his, just inches away.

“Fine, but we’re going to have to make up for it when I get back,” he groaned, clearing his throat as he brought himself back to a standing position.

“It’s a date,” I replied, fastening the last button on my shirt and following Ade out of his apartment. We had an intended short, but inevitably long, kiss just before I exited the cab at a liquor store where I was scheduled to meet Dawn. I stood on the curb, watching Ade pull away and I already felt

lonely. I then turned to face the discount beer prices and a perfectly shaped Italian model rustling up against Dawn as he tried to focus on wine. I rolled my eyes, clicked my heels and entered, trying not to start the evening in a huff.

“Hallo Jone,” Donata said, being the first one to notice me. I half smiled, half snarled, since her accent made it sound as though she were saying ‘John’ when she said my name.

“Hey Joan,” Dawn mumbled, not bothering to look at me, as he remained intensely focused on the wine labels.

“Hey... where’s Lillie?” I asked. Pausing momentarily to look Donata up and down, in awe of how much skin she had managed to show.

“Change of plans; he’s gonna meet us there. So all we have to do is pick out some wine and we can take off,” Dawn stated, glancing back and forth from a Poggio Cenni label and Donata’s ass.

“Great, get to it then,” I sighed, knowing that it would be no easy decision.

“I lika yowr dreys,” Donata spit out, giving me her best smile. I made a confused expression since she had never been anything but a cold, distant, bitch to me.

“Since when does she speak English?” I asked, talking to Dawn but staring at Donata who was fighting to understand what I said.

“She doesn’t really. She’s only been taking lessons for like a month,” Dawn replied, pushing past me and shuffling down the isle.

“And what’s with the smile? I thought she hated me,” I inquired, peeling my eyes from the piercing grip of Donata’s gaze.

“What the hell are you talking about? She’s never been able to understand you, how could she hate you?”

“I don’t know, she was always scowling and pretending like I didn’t exist,” I replied, sticking a piece of gum I’d been chewing to the smile of some bimbo on a Budweiser poster.

“She’s a model, smiling isn’t their thing. And from what I can tell, she likes you,” Dawn exclaimed, rubbing a bottle of wine as though he expected a genie to appear.

“Thank you,” I said cheerily to Donata, who had become lost in the conversation. She grinned widely and said, “Yow’r walcome.”

“Fuck! Where’s divine intervention when you need it?” Dawn grumbled, becoming impatient earlier than I had anticipated. “Joan, what’s a good wine?”

“How the hell should I know? She’s the one from Italy,” I stated, pointing my head momentarily at Donata. Dawn made a funny face and then said something in Italian to Donata. After which she began glancing over the labels of the wines, picking one up a few seconds later. Dawn frowned, after taking the bottle from her, and rambled off into gibberish.

“Idiota,” Donata mumbled, turning to face me as she rolled her eyes from how stubborn he was. I laughed and gave her a look to imply that I felt the same way. After another grueling ten minutes Dawn finally settled on a bottle of wine and we were freed from the boredom of the store. We all strutted out of the place being the only ones dressed formally and, thus, required to act superior. Every man on the street forgot what they were doing when Donata bent over to pick up her recently fallen bag, either by accident or for attention. Dawn had already started shuffling up the street as I waited by Donata for her to follow. However, when she stood up she cried out

Dawn's name and brought him to an immediate stand still. She lifted a heel and shot a pissed off look at him, bringing her hands to her hips to strike a stern pose. He slunk back and I dropped my mouth as a dual shock came to me. The first being that anyone had managed to get Dawn to do what they wanted and, the second, that Donata was wearing a diamond on her finger the size of an elk shit.

“What the fuck is that?” I gasped, pulling up her wrist to stare with awe back and forth between the ring and Dawn. Donata smiled and pretended to blush, as I imagined the attention was common.

“Oh yeah, we're getting married,” Dawn stated in a monotone voice. “It's for her visa. Apparently this country has an abundance of models and won't sponsor another for permanent residency.”

“Still, you didn't have to buy the biggest diamond in the country,” I whined, somewhat jealous/dumbfounded/annoyed.

“She refused to have anything less. I thought it was kind of odd too, seeing as how I'm doing her the favor, but whatever; I can afford it.”

“I know, you remind me all the time,” I grumbled, releasing my grip of Donata's hand and my sight of the ring. Dawn hailed a cab to avoid hurting Donata's feet, laced in excruciatingly beautiful heels, and I constantly glanced over at the two of them—speaking in foreign tongues, dressed in extravagant, overpriced, irrelevant contrivances that I remembered having. Luxury stained my palette and I would forever be subject to its aftertaste.

“How has Add?” Donata asked, leaning in front of Dawn so that she could see me.

“Sorry?”

“Add, yowr... mahn?” she said slowly.

“Oh, he’s doing well thank you,” I replied, keeping a lid on how guilty I felt about having hated Donata. She turned to Dawn and asked something in Italian. He nodded a couple times and mumbled something in return.

“Congrachulations,” she exclaimed, leaning back into her seat.

“Thanks,” I said, looking down at Dawn poking my leg so he could have a word with me.

“I’m worried about you,” he whispered, leaning towards me.

“Why?”

“That’s the obvious part Joan... the question is if you’re going to be alright tonight.”

“I’m fine Dawn,” I huffed, embarrassed that my anxiety was so blatant.

“Fine,” he sighed, abandoning his fleeting attempt to accommodate my feelings... he really must have been worried.

Dawn’s incessant sexual prompting of Donata commenced once more and I scowled, thinking earnestly of how I felt. I watched the ring, strung around her finger for more reasons than Dawn would ever admit, and shuddered. I contemplated Ade’s degree of commitment and what would inevitably happen in the relationship. I thought intently of our love and whether or not it was a basis of body or mind. And upon that I swallowed my doubts yet again; hoping that they’d digest so I could stop regurgitating my perpetual feelings of guilt and worry. But still I thought of April, of Stacy, and—ultimately—the inevitably awkward night that I presently marched towards.

Chapter 19

Playfully sexual memorabilia was, without a doubt, April's forte. I stood in her entranceway thinking of this as I stared at a keydish that lay in the small of a nude, ceramic woman's back. This coming after Stacy greeted us, wearing her blatantly contrived smile even before she opened the door. That following the half an hour of spontaneous traffic, keeping me locked in a cab with the two horniest new-to-be-weds alive. And that was immediately preceded by my gut feeling that tonight was really going to suck.

I heard Stacy tell April that we had arrived in a less than thrilled voice. My eyes slipped from the nude figure's back, to see Dawn's arm curling around Donata's hip to cop a feel. I punched him in the shoulder causing him to turn and frown, expecting an answer. I nagged at him for a moment about how 'tonight was not the night,' and he pouted into the other room with Donata following every step of the way. April came in a moment later, sporting a large smile. She wrapped her arms around me and I swung one around her.

"Hey Joan, how are you?" she asked, coming out of the hug, but leaving her arms around my waist.

"I'm doing very well, and yourself?"

"Very well as well," she replied, in accordance with our general greeting banter. "Where's Dawn?"

“He and his mistress, turned ball and chain, let themselves in,” I remarked smugly.

“Well let’s go say hello then, shall we?”

I followed April into the living room, to find Lillie sprawled out on one of the couches, waiting for someone he could talk to. He sat up quickly when I came into view, but restrained his joy so as not to stand out. He moved a little to the left, accidentally bumping into his couch neighbor. Whoever that was made a prissy, pissy face and rolled their eyes over to check out Donata. I squinted trying to decipher whether or not they were, in fact, a man or a woman. But as their gaze drew up to mine, my face morphed to a friendly/awkward smile and I averted my eyes. Dawn, Stacy and some miscellaneous bone-thin woman, wearing a dress so extravagantly white that it may well have been a Vera Wang, all sat in dead positions around the room. A dull recording of something that sounded like a sick Sinatra belting it out in an erratic jazz compilation played lowly behind me.

“Joan, this is Leslie,” April said, gesturing towards the sexually ambiguous person uncomfortably wedged next to Lillie. She gave me a polite, yet painfully manifested smile as I reached out my hand to shake hers. She hesitated momentarily and then clasped my palm; giving me a half-assed pump as we shook, promptly letting her arm fall limp afterwards. “And this is Diane,” April stated, redirecting my focus to the glare shooting off of Diane’s dress and neon blonde hair.

“Nice to meet you,” I exclaimed, trying to stay cheery despite the gloom radiating from Stacy’s gaze. Diane extended her hand, palm down, leaving me to misconstrue this gesture as though she wished for me to kiss it. Her big, innocent, eyes intently caressed my every move as I awkwardly shook her hovering hand. Then I delicately released it back into the wildly

unhealthy figure of its seemingly anorexic bearer. She smiled of course. These people were very familiar.

I took a seat next to Lillie, placing my purse on the coffee table as I did so. I scanned the hors d'oeuvres, with my fingers tapping on my knee. Eventually my eyes came to rest on a platter of insufferably delicious fois gras morsels and I extended my hand to bite off more than I could chew. Lillie watched me wearily, disgruntled, as he was on a diet. I chewed defiantly loud; until I saw the unrest I was causing and put my attitude to bed.

“So Joan, what do you do?” Leslie asked me, in a neutral voice that gave me no hints of her sex. I rustled around the liver in my mouth, forcing a premature swallow as I thought of an answer.

“I actually work at the Whore House,” I said, no longer looking to the appetizers for comfort.

“Oh, that’s nice,” Leslie said as warmly as she could muster.

“This must be a big career opportunity for you then; dinner party with the boss and all,” Diane commented, with the intent of making light of Stacy’s invitation.

“Actually, no. April and I used to date. It’s because of our relationship that I’m here, not a ploy to win Stacy’s favor,” I stated, trying to say it as though it were amusing, to avoid offending anyone. I glanced up at Stacy who winced from my comment, but seemed relieved that I wasn’t maliciously jousting with her at the moment. A few people gave a nice smile that made me feel a little less insecure and I inquired about them.

The conversation spread until April announced that dinner was to begin. She then herded us into the dining room and sat us around a large, round, dark, polished, thick, wood table. I was positioned in between Leslie

and Diane, with April to the left and Stacy to the right. Lillie, Dawn and Donata were all placed in front of me as the starter was brought before us. We all drew our attention to our plates, a couple of obligatory pleased sounds coming from Leslie and myself as we admired the presentation. However, Lillie, Dawn and Diane seemed unimpressed. The sauces were scattered across the plate, everything was mixed up and the only way I could see pleasing their palettes was by reorganizing it. I put my initial reaction in check, and went to work.

The clamor of stabbing forks and whistling knives filled the air as the conversation went dry. I eyed the room carefully, focusing on the gulping pour of wine. The music transformed to a solo saxophone; quickening it's pace to an uncertain end, and on my impeccable table manners that I used to prove my worth.

Dawn fed his fiancée a raspberry while staring lustfully into her eyes, making me feel sick. I gulped down a mouthful of water and turned to face Stacy who I had noticed eyeing me. "So Stacy, did you prepare tonight's meal?" I asked, reaching for my wine.

"Yes, although April helped me with the desserts," she replied, glaring since I had made an ugly face when pulling up from the food.

"Not much, though," April stated modestly.

"Well this is quite good," Diane commented, using the fork in hand to point down at her appetizer. After that my attention slipped. Stacy went off into some crap about the indigenous plant life of Thailand and how she 'won't eat anything else.' Dawn focused on Donata, his real meal. While Lillie stared blankly ahead as he was now mind-numbingly bored which, I might add, was the case at most dinner 'parties.' I almost felt sorry for him, but then I remembered I was in the same boat. I managed to throw in the occasional one liner that only Stacy would understand and detest. But, for

some reason, she held her tongue. She glared at me, bitterly resenting that the only blade at hand was a butter knife. But, despite her unrest, I kept a smug little smile that no one else misconstrued for the truth.

When the main course came out, we all had enough alcohol in us to be excited. We each received our exquisitely well-dressed plates; lavished with herbs and perfectly placed, edible ornaments. A gasp of wonder escaped everyone's lips, but moreso from those easily intoxicated. Stacy concluded her frequent trips to the kitchen, to check on things, and sat down to fake enjoying the company. I picked up my knife and sliced into the heart shaped cut of lamb for our slaughter. The insidious aroma of the entrée filled my head, and I lay weak to the meal before me. I clenched my wine, now a pillar of flavor rather than the crutch of status known to the appetizer.

"I'd like to thank everyone for coming," April exclaimed, raising her glass to make her customary toast to the guests. "I haven't been able to see many of you lately, but I'm thrilled that you could all make it tonight," she said, focusing on me for a moment. "And if Stacy would keep off my butt at work maybe we could do this more often," she chuckled, drawing to a close by bringing her glass to her lips. Everyone did the same before resuming their previous conversations or mealtime escapades. I, however, remained fixated on Stacy; seeing her smile for the first time as she forgot about me and adored the pure-hearted act of April. I watched her love, their love, and felt the guilty sickness of succumbing to my own folly. In return for this guilt, a momentary glimpse of joy escaped me, allowing me to see how happy April had become.

"Everything's wonderful, Stacy," I said, trying to be as sincere as possible. But I felt as though my efforts were in vain when she shrugged off my comment and ran to the aid of the oven timer. Everyone finished their meals, content as they could be, never expecting the approaching, decadent

gloom of dessert. After what seemed like months, Stacy appeared, bearing her final culinary work. A large slice of devils foods cake, but cut in two with both pieces facing one another; yet conjoined by a thick, dreary, fudge engulfing the scoops of vanilla ice cream melting at its side. She placed one of these before each of us; my mouth salivating and drooping open. For, at the time, I thought I could have my cake and eat it too.

Chapter 20

“Oh fuck!” I cried, a little too loudly due to my moderate inebriation, as I stumbled down the hallway of April’s building. “I forgot my purse.”

I turned around as steadily as I could, passing Lillie who had stopped to tie his shoe. “Where are you going?” he asked, looking up at me, falling to the side and grasping the wall.

“I forgot my purse,” I said, walking quickly up to April’s door.

“It’s probably still unlocked,” Lillie commented, now standing upright, swaying from side to side. “Want me to wait for you?”

“Sure, I’ll be right back.”

I turned the doorknob slowly, so as not to make any noise, since in my drunken state I felt it better to be quiet than polite. I pushed the door open slowly until my purse came into view, resting atop the coffee table in the living room. I crept steadily forward; pulling my arms up to my side to further dramatize my villain like gestures. When I reached my purse I leaned in, grabbed onto its strap, and flung it gleefully over my shoulder. As I began to tip-toe outside, I passed the kitchen and caught ear of the after dinner conversation between two feuding lovers.

“And what was with that ‘everything’s wonderful’ bullshit? Like I’d honestly buy into her crap after she spent so much of the night insulting me,” Stacy shouted, furiously washing dishes.

“Don’t yell at me, I’m not going to try and explain her actions,” April retaliated somewhere in the kitchen; where, exactly, I couldn’t see as I stood motionless in the living room. “Besides, I don’t think she was fully to blame here, you’ve done nothing but antagonize her from the start.”

“What?” Stacy cried, stopping her dishwashing to angrily address April. “I gave her a job, I put up with her shit and I stand by while she still obviously chases after you! Excuse me if I’m not being nice enough in the process!”

“Joan doesn’t feel that way about me anymore. I’ve told you that before, so trust me when I say so. And as for giving her the job, that was a favor to me because she needed the help. So if there are any problems about it direct them to me!” April yelled, making a rustling noise from the other side of the room.

“Oh, come on! It’s so obvious that she still loves you! The way she stares at you, censors herself in front of you, it’s pathetic!”

“We’re friends! That’s it! She didn’t do those things when we dated anyway. It’s probably just because she knows how much I hate unnecessary cursing!” April shouted, the tone of her voice implying that Stacy didn’t have the same courtesy.

“Swearing accentuates a point! And I like to accentuate my points, so leave it the fuck alone already!” Stacy yelled, slamming a plate into the dish holder.

“Fine, accentuate your points all you want. But don’t talk about Joan like she’s bent on winning back my love, because she’s not. She has a boyfriend and from what she tells me they’re very deeply in love,” April said, defending me as best she could.

“Does he know she’s a guy?” Stacy muttered, vindictively. I wobbled suddenly from what Stacy said. My eyes started to cloud as I felt a spike of rage inside of me, but it quickly faded to hurt.

“That’s not fair,” April replied, a little less angrily than I would have hoped. “It’s hard for Joan to deal with that and meet people who accept her.”

“Yeah, I bet it’s hard to find people who accept she-male’s,” Stacy stated, calming down her dishwashing pace as the cheap shots came out.

“Shut up,” April cried, standing up and passing by the part of the door that I was looking into. I quickly adjusted myself and pressed up against a near by wall so that now all I could do was listen. “You may not like Joan, but don’t make fun of her for that... everyone makes mistakes.”

When April said that, a rush of pulsating nausea similar to having my stomach pumped consumed me. I slid down the wall, keeping my feet where they were, until I found myself in the fetal position. I sat outside of the kitchen’s entranceway, crying quietly. But I didn’t care if they heard me, or found me. It didn’t matter how upset they’d be that I’d eavesdropped, because there was no room for embarrassment in devastation. I thought about how April must really feel to say what she did. How she thinks that my sex change was a result of my feelings for her. How, in her mind, I’m a man. Maybe because of the way I looked or maybe something else all together. Regardless, I felt self-pity start to take hold. I dwelled on my mother’s lack of support, how my father ignored me, and my sister hated me. I thought about April dumping me, my friends deserting me, and how loveless my life must really be if everyone felt this way.

“She really is pathetic, April. I mean, how could someone go through with that, just for a chance to get you back?” Stacy blathered on, the ignorance of which mattered little in my current state. “She probably thought it would be romantic.”

“It was her mistake and I don’t have any right to make her explain it. The best I can do is stick by her and try to be her friend, regardless of whatever feelings she may have for me,” April stated, her words echoing through my now empty opinion of her.

“But I don’t even understand that. How can you stay in her life? You’re probably doing more harm than good.”

“It’s not like I’m doing it as a favor to her. And I certainly don’t think I’m causing her any harm by being her friend... we were very close at one time, but she’s changed quite a bit since then, and now the friendship is more for old times sake. I loved her, of course, but I kind of wonder if it’s the same person today,” April said, in a lower voice that made me assume they were now standing very close to one another. I, however, continued to wipe away the blinding tears. Continued to snuff my howling sobs. Continued to continue listening.

“Well, I don’t like her, you know that. But if you do I’m not going to pry into your relationship. However, I ask kindly that you try and keep our lives separate from one another. It’s bad enough that I have to deal with her at work,” Stacy said reassuringly. Then I heard the sound of kissing; a wet smacking sound followed by my sob. A brief pause and I sniffled. They didn’t hear me, as they were too caught up in one another. But, unbeknownst to them, I was being ripped apart inside. I tried to hold my knees up to support me, but my hands kept releasing them to wipe away tears. My palms were now smothered in a wet, glossy ooze as my makeup had disintegrated. My mouth drooped open, screaming a muted requiem; released as faint squeaks—gasps for air and hope. Then to make the night complete I heard the door rip open and saw Lillie, drunk and impatient hunting for me. He didn’t see me curled up in the dark corner beside the kitchen, and didn’t think twice about announcing his query to the ears of everyone.

“Joan what the fuck’s taking so long?” he cried, only after which did his eyes fall, grief stricken, on my horrified face. Stacy and April emerged a moment later, looking down at me. But no one said a word. And all that could be heard were my feeble attempts to contain my wails.

Chapter 21

I quite my job the next day. Stacy didn't say much. It seemed as though she were more embarrassed than I was and, incidentally, treated me without contempt for the first time. Maybe she was happy that I had heard them. Maybe now that she knew I knew, she could stop holding her tongue. Brooding in secret with my supposed friend. I picked up my few scattered things, and said 'goodbye' to those people I was on a first name basis with. No one seemed too broken up about losing me. Maybe I'd just been a running joke to them. The guy who thinks he's a woman. What a laugh.

When I finally did exit the store, I caught a glimpse of Stacy trying to say something to me. She clung to her overbearingly arrogant temperament. Only now her conscience weighed on her enough to dent her stride. When she finally stood before me, the dreary silence of everything I had to say to her became clear. She swallowed, and for a moment broke character, showing me the human component of her Batman villain persona.

"I... well, I was just being protective of April... and... you deserve better than that," she whined, constantly checking her peripheral view in case a predator saw weakness. "The things I said were because I was angry and... uh... I am sorry, Joan, really I am," she exclaimed, a sorrowful face taking hold as she pulled some of her hair down to try and hide herself. I wanted to cry, to throw a fit, and blame her for everything. To crack down and berate her, so she'd know just how awful I thought her to be. But it was pointless; I didn't have the strength to pretend I was April's favorite—to mime Stacy's

notorious confidence and rise above what she said. Or, for that matter, the right or ability to hurt her the way she had me.

“Don’t you mean John?” I stated in a cold, deep voice, glaring at her hatefully. She looked to the ground and didn’t reply. I sniffed sharply and walked past her.

Since she was no longer a part of my life, April faded as well. She tried to call me. Tried to apologize for what she believed, what she felt. But I didn’t bother explaining to her that it wasn’t a choice. It wasn’t stupid, or wrong by any means. And it most certainly wasn’t a mistake. I didn’t even bother explaining that she wasn’t my ideal of love to obtain, but rather my inspiration for reform. And it didn’t take long before she stopped calling all together.

I stepped out of the door into the cool teeth of a tunneling breeze caught between the buildings. I adjusted the bag on my shoulder and trudged forward staring at the cracks in the concrete. A strong gust of wind blew from behind me, reminding me once again why it’s a good idea to wear panties with skirts. A dog barked, echoing a police siren, making an inner city rhythm. I gazed solemnly into the reflection of a skyscraper on a skyscraper; the image of which continually distorted from the glare of the sun and the exhaust of a hundred cars huddled together on a crowded street. I passed bewildered tourists strolling along, desperately pointing at everything their senses could engulf. I watched determined businessmen, frantically trying to pass people and resume their busy days. The street vendors screamed into the air, informing the world of their fantastic prices. Someone parked in the box and the street crowded with people, bumping and pushing one another so they could cross. Music from my left was a steel drum group. Music to my right was a break-dancing duo. But I didn’t hear either.

I walked for what, surprisingly enough, seemed a short while. I noticed everything but thought of nothing more than where I was going. Ade came back into town today, and that meant I could feel loved. I could hold someone and know that they needed me there every bit as much as I needed to be there. I was out on the line now more than ever, and I embraced Ade whole-heartedly for comfort—even though I couldn't completely unfold the happening of the last few days to him.

I arrived at his building with a sticky sweat from the heat of the city. My clothes clung to my sides, on the verge of wetting through. I wiped my brow and entered, avoiding the stairs. Choosing to take the elevator up and bask in the air conditioning instead. After the white noise of the street faded, my mind cleared of everything but the night prior. The silence frightened me and I looked around frantically to try and shake away the memories. I succeeded well enough as the elevator's door chimed and drew open. I rushed out of it, needing to find something or someone to keep me from falling into the depressed, mundane slumber of the lonely—of the forgotten—of the heartbroken. I frantically knocked on Ade's door. With my past nipping at my heels, I felt the tears start to flood the room. I couldn't breathe. I felt cold and flustered, afraid and entrapped. But then distress subsided and relief overwhelmed me. Ade appeared smiling, overjoyed to see me and I fell into his arms clenching him to me.

A sob escaped my lips while he caressed my back; worried, as I was worried. He stepped back inside, closing the door behind him, but never releasing me from his hold. He comforted me as best he could, trying to understand what was wrong without saying a word. My sobs escalated, until eventually the tears poured fourth, catching my quivering lip. He led me over to the couch, a single arm embracing me as I limped ahead. I fell down into the leather seat, slumping forward so that I now hung lifeless above my knees. Ade's hand slid across my back as he leaned in to ask, "What's

wrong?" I momentarily looked up at him, the sight of which calmed me enough to return his affection. I kissed him; gently at first, but passionately as I felt love surge through me. I quickly forgot my problems while continuing to feed another. He was perfect. And I had built myself up to be.

Chapter 22

“I think I’m gonna tell him,” I confessed to Dawn, as we sat in a quiet little café nestled away in a neighborhood controlled by the aficionados of designer coffee/organized crime—vis-à-vis, Starbucks.

“Wow,” Dawn sighed, after setting down his double D cup and wiping away his steamed milk mustache. “What brought this on?”

“I love him... I really love him and I want him to know me and need me for who I am... not have to live in fear of something I’ve tried to hide from him,” I explained, looking out the large window to my left at the leaves blowing in the fall wind; the beautiful reds, oranges, and yellows that you don’t have to OD on curry to see. Dawn held back his need to pick at my fourteen-year-old girl love speech, and let me sit quietly. I allowed a smile to intrude on my intensity as I thought of Ade and a recent walk through the park. A moment that stands out in any relationship when you’re left questioning why you put up with the snoring, arrogance or his obstinate need to not flush. No, no... this was one of those cherished memories, that’s so pleasant you can’t shake it once awakened.

“Seriously! Pay attention to the people who look at themselves!” I cried, trying to get Ade to understand one of my recent observations. One of those things you pick up, only after you put yourself through the grueling task of being veraciously forward about just how screwed up you are.

“What are we talking about again?” he asked, walking slowly and leaving the gleeful skipping to me.

“Ok! You know how in some stores or malls they have mirrors on the walls?”

“Yeah?” he laughed, giving me a look of adorable admiration.

“Well, watch the people who turn to check themselves when they’re walking by the mirrors,” I explained, linking arms with him and focusing on his lips since they’d always press together if he didn’t understand something. “Ugly people don’t look, because they don’t want to see that... and really-good-looking people don’t look because they know they’re good looking.”

“I hope you’re going somewhere with this.”

“But average-looking people stare... they’re just so insecure about themselves that they always relinquish any opportunity to double check those beauty potholes,” I exclaimed, finding myself quite amusing.

“Soooooo?”

“So, it’s funny!”

“No, you’re funny,” he said, poking my nose with his; the usual couple stuff that’s taboo around anyone who isn’t in a relationship. Fortunately, the squirrels didn’t mind. “I’d say the real question here is whether or not you look at yourself when you’re passing by a mirror,” he stated, making a face as though he recognized the potential landmine but had a compliment lined up to disarm it.

“What do you think?” I asked, playing along with his game.

“I think you do, but you shouldn’t.”

“Maybe,” I replied nodding, refusing to fully acknowledge the extent of his correct assessment. “What about you?”

“Never.”

I smacked him in the arm and laughed. He turned me so that I faced him and my arm unlinked from his. We had walked just the right distance to find ourselves far enough from people to be intimate. He altered his gaze into one that I hadn't noticed before; a benevolent intensity that thrilled me. I tucked my gum into the back of my mouth, feeling that a kiss was imminent.

“I love you,” he whispered, leaning in towards me.

“You said it first,” I exclaimed, astonished and overjoyed.

“What kind of reply is that?”

“The best kind,” I said, wrapping my arms around him and pulling myself into his kiss. We held each other for what could never be long enough. Locked in a kiss and nestled into one another. When I finally did pull away I managed to say sincerely, and divinely, “I love you, too, Ade.”

After that a comforting silence took us. We looked at one another, grinning like a couple of love struck morons. Holding hands I slowed my pace to meet his, clinging to his side. Our feelings hadn't changed, but our consciences were free and the weight had been removed from our shoulders. Relief and contentment filled me to the brim. I couldn't believe I'd pulled off one of those fairytale 'I love you' moments. But soon enough the experience was a memory.

“When?” Dawn asked, having sat idly by for as long as he could bear. I pulled groggily and reluctantly back to the dilemma of being candid with Ade. In my opinion, shrinks are the modern day confessionals. But I couldn't afford one, so my friends took the role as the sole executors of my problems.

“I’m going to a dinner party with him in a month or so... If I can keep it in until then I’d like to tell him after I’ve met his family... so he’ll feel guilty for breaking up with me,” I tried to say cheerfully, knowing that I couldn’t manipulate my way through judgment day. Dawn paused briefly, massaging his bosom brew, knowing how futile any attempt to instill hope in me would be.

“You know, you’re really fucking depressing when you’re sober,” he laughed, resorting to his usual blunt, indignant humor that warmed my heart to hear.

“Thanks,” I chuckled, a silence following. “Dawn?”

“What?”

“Why are you marrying Donata?” I inquired, almost laughing myself out of my chair as I spoke and saw the relief in his face that someone had finally asked him.

“Honestly?” he mumbled, leaning towards me as such an acknowledgment required discretion.

“Yeah,” I replied, wiping my eyes clear of any joy induced tears.

“Because that pudgy little shit Cupid finally caught up to me,” he exclaimed, keeping with his habit of elaborately explaining things to emphasize his self-proclaimed wit. I rolled my eyes, but decided to go with the surprised response rather than the sarcastic nit picking.

“So you actually love her?” I cried, my mouth wide open and brows slanted straight down.

“Keep your voice down!” he yelled smirking. “Yeah I do... it’s inhibiting... kind of like,” he said right up until I cut him off.

“Please don’t give me your take on love. I didn’t buy this coffee just to throw it up all over myself.”

“Alright, I’ll spare you that much... but there is something you need to hear,” he stated, suddenly becoming serious. “Now that I’m in love, I know all the good things I’ve missed out on, and have become aware of all the pitfalls too. But see, the thing is that now I realize that all the stuff I was afraid of doesn’t matter. And if Ade really loves you, it won’t matter to him either,” he whispered, intently watching my loosening expression. I sat still, realizing that my tear glands couldn’t keep up with my fluctuating emotions. My lips shook and my body quaked. That little shit Dawn hit me in a place other than my nerves. And just like that, I saw hope.

Chapter 23

Attaching my earrings, watching myself done up to perfection in the mirror, I thought with great anticipation of the night ahead. I was to attend a dinner hosted by Ade's family; in which I would not only have the chance to meet those persons he was closest to, but also to see him reunited with his father for the first time in years. It was important for me that he did so, as it was for him (however, indirectly for myself, in that my relationship with my father had been a loveless catastrophe). I told him of our turmoil and troubles. And, in doing so, persuaded him (to some degree) to forgive and forget his father's sins. Which, I might add, were much worse than anything my dad had done.

Ade was fastening his tie over and over again, pursuing that perfect knot. He was wearing another of his beautiful suits; gray this time. I had on a classic black evening gown that showed off my fit figure and extraordinary back. I looked like I had come straight from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. I wore a beautiful, diamond, bracelet that I had received from Ade a few nights prior. We exchanged warm smiles as we readied ourselves, keeping the conversation to a minimum since the bulk of our concentration was focused on how we looked.

"Are you nervous?" Ade asked, still adjusting his tie.

"Of course not! I'm excited is what I am," I replied, looking at him in the mirror, positioned just over my right shoulder.

“Excited? I hate to burst your bubble but I think you’re getting your hopes up over nothing,” he commented, walking over to me, resting his hands atop my bare shoulders. I pulled one of my hands up and placed it atop his, the other fidgeting with powder.

“How could I not be excited? I finally get to meet your family.”

“I love that you think it’s a pleasure.”

“Well, it is. It’s important that I meet the people who are important in your life.”

“Why is that, exactly?”

“Because it helps me be closer to you,” I replied, double-checking my everything.

“Then how come I haven’t met your friends?”

“Because if you met my friends, ‘closer’ would be you walking out the door,” I explained, standing up to see the loving embrace of Ade’s eyes.

“Don’t be so sure. We might even get along.”

“Oh, really? Who would you get along best with? Lillie the drag queen, or Dawn the nympho?”

“Well, if they’re important to you then I don’t see how anything they do could deter me from getting along with them,” Ade said, leaning in close to me, until I could feel his breath on my lips.

“Don’t, you’ll fuck up my lipstick,” I whispered, for the sake of saying so; knowing quite well that he’d kiss me anyway. Sure enough he did, and I held that thought until we were in the cab. He was nervous about seeing his father again. I could tell; I could relate.

“Mom just put him on the phone,” I pleaded, scanning a Kleenex for a snot-free patch.

“He doesn’t want to speak to you John,” my mother explained, apathetic as always.

“Christ sakes! How hard is it for you to call me Joan!” I cried, redirecting my frustration from my father’s stubbornness to my mother’s misunderstanding.

“Don’t yell at me, I accepted your choices, I made sure you received your inheritance despite your father’s objections. So don’t think that I haven’t stood up for you.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night,” I muttered, clasping my forehead as a crying headache infested my cranium.

“You’re so ungrateful,” she hissed. “If it weren’t for me you’d be on the street.”

“And if it weren’t for you I’d be happy.”

“I don’t know where you got it in your head that I’m such a villain, honestly I don’t. I’ve tried my best to help you despite your need to rebel against this family.”

“I didn’t call to have this conversation again... I called because Dad’s sick and I thought that maybe he’d want to talk to me,” I sobbed, turning towards my window to watch the happenings of the outside world.

Ade’s hand rested atop my knee as I watched the outside world pass by the cab window. The snow of the fresh winter glided to the ground, swaying in the breeze. It bled on the windshield and the lights melted to the window. The city would be quick to respond and decorations were sure to

appear if only to pressure people into buying more. Ade arbitrarily gave directions to the cabdriver, making me smile. I held his hand that held me, and we enjoyed the ride together.

“I can’t help you... he’s made up his mind, and you know how stubborn he can be,” my mother explained, a glimmer of guilt denting her indifference after a full minute of my wails.

“I don’t understand,” I wheezed, drooping forward on a chair parked by my bedroom window. “How can you neglect me like this... despise me so much?”

“Jo-a-n,” my mother said with great difficulty. “What you’ve done isn’t easy for anybody, particularly those who have known you the longest.” She paused, and in her silence I could hear how she pitied me. “I don’t think I’ll ever be able to treat you as my daughter... because you’re not, you’re my son.”

“Regardless of son or daughter, I am your child,” I stated, a firmness presenting itself in my tone that I hadn’t anticipated. “And, as such, I have a right to speak with my father... make him talk to me Mom, please.”

“No,” my mother announced before becoming completely silent. I could see now what happiness cost. The absolution I had expected from my sex change was incomplete by way of the people in my life.

“Goodbye, Mom,” I whispered, setting the phone down. “Goodbye, Dad.”

Like a prince, Ade courteously extended his arm. I took it and exited the cab, chuckling at how cliché his affectionate gestures were, but genuine

nonetheless. We strolled, linked by our arms, towards the huge archaic door of Ade's uncle's house. It had the look of a classic mansion, but the retail probably cost more than the estate. I looked through the window, seeing a group of people wearing suits, gowns, and sweater vests. Holding wine and laughing gaily. I lifted my chin, foreseeing the change of mood, and braced myself. Once upon a time I was the rich kid—manners were in my blood.

As the black door caved inward the red glow of candles from a divine chandelier swaying above us, illuminated the foyer. I stared in awe at the extravagant spiral staircase, covered in a blood red carpet laid over a finely polished, hard wood floor. The wide doorways let people prance gingerly and drunkenly from room to room; absorbing the intimidating art that filled in for money tacked to the walls. Everything in sight was a dark, deeply-stained wood—reminding me of something I couldn't remember but refused to forget.

“Ade!” a handsome man bellowed, in a deep piercing voice. Ade laughed, unlinking his arm from me to give the man a handshake-hug. “Finally gotcha out o’ the office did I?”

“Enjoy it while you can,” Ade joked, turning to face me. “Aaron, I want you to meet Joan,” he exclaimed, proud to present me.

“It’s a pleasure,” I stated, taking Aaron’s hand.

“Pleasure’s all mine,” he replied, leaving me to assume that he was, at least, partly responsible for Ade’s immaculate manners. “Wow Ade, she’s beautiful,” Aaron commented, chuckling when I blushed.

“She sure is,” Ade said adoringly. His attention drifted from me to the livingroom, where an old man stood in the middle of a crowd. Ade adjusted his stance and slid his hands into his pockets. I watched him uneasily step forward, glancing back at me, looking at him. “If you’ll excuse

me for a moment,” he stated, wandering off; leaving me at the side of his uncle Aaron.

“I don’t know if you know, but it’s practic’ly a miracle havin’ Ade show up tonight,” Aaron explained, while we watched Ade cautiously approach his father. “After what he done to his mother and all,” Aaron muttered.

“What did he do?” I asked, hoping that he wouldn’t take it as though I were prying.

“So Ade didn’t tell yah then?”

“Apparently not,” I replied, watching Ade’s strangely familiar father greet his son.

“It’s a shame’s, what it is. Now I don’t wanna seem like I’m gossipin’ or nothin’. But I feel like ‘cause you’re important enough for Ade to bring yah here, yah aughta know,” Aaron whispered, stepping to the side so that he could tell me privately. I peeled my gaze from Ade’s father, and my attempt to recognize him, listening intently to Aaron instead. “When Ade gone away to college his father done a terrible thing. People said he didn’t even know he’d done it, but they proved he had and lock’d him up for years. He’s only recently been released yah see.”

“What exactly did he do?”

“He killed his wife—killed poor Ade’s mother. Dumped her right into the river and watched her go over the falls,” Aaron explained gravely. “Ade hadn’t talked wit him since... but now he has, and I imagine it’s cause o’ you,” Aaron said, picking up his spirit as he wrapped an arm around my back to lead me into the living room. I tried to smile at everyone encircling me, eager to meet Ade’s love interest. But we passed all of them and came to

rest before Ade and his father. I swallowed hard and squinted harder, trying to explain why I recognized the old man before me.

“Ah, here she is,” Ade exclaimed, turning to introduce me proudly. “Dad, this is Jo...” he tried to say; being cut off mid sentence by his father saying my name simultaneously with him. Then as I stared at his gray hair, and confused face, memory resumed and fear consumed.

“So your name’s Joan then is it?” Rusty asked, looking up at me romancing the wall.

“Yeah,” I replied, bending down for the mutual purpose of mooning Lillie and pulling up my urine splashed shorts.

“Nice name, but I think ladies are supposed to crouch when they pee.”

“I know, but I used to be a man,” I replied, trying to be as clever as possible while so very, very high.

“Joan? I remember yah from outside o’ that club,” Rusty cried, being the only one laughing in the room, while my stomach churned and face turned white. Everyone else stood unflinching, watching the drama unfold.

“You two have met before?” Ade exclaimed, shocked as he continually looked between us.

“No,” I stated, my voice barely being heard.

“Sure we did!” Rusty cried, in his usual blunt manner that I recalled from our initial encounter. “Peed all over yah self,” he remarked, slicing into my dignity and current resolve. “Said somethin’ about havin’ been a man too,” he exclaimed, continuing to chuckle, while failing to realize how

inappropriate he was being. Ade glanced back and forth between us, as though there were now two strangers before him.

“What?” Ade asked, nervously laughing. He turned to face me, wobbling back, extending my arms to try and keep my balance. Either the room or my head was spinning, neither of which could hold my focus. I bumped into the side of a table and then into the side of a guest. My vision was going white, and the only feeling I had left in me was panic, and the need the leave.

“I... I have to go,” I said, choking on my words, before turning sharply, fleeing out the door. I removed my heels and ran, barefoot, down the snowy street. I pumped my arm back and forth, using the other to hold up the bottom of my dress. I frantically cried. The tears and sweat streamed as I thought of nothing but escape. Then after my lungs gave out, and I returned to civilization, I turned to see that no one was chasing me. I collapsed next to a dumpster, in an alley, and wailed. Hugging myself, as I rocked back and forth, deliriously confused and distraught. My now ruined dress, coat, and shoes hung off of me—relics of a doomed love. Now that I had gotten away I could think. I knew that I’d have to tell Ade. I knew that because of tonight he would probably never trust me again, let alone talk to me. But I still clung to hope—praying that love would prevail.

Chapter 24

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here today to mourn the passing of...”

“Ade?” I asked, shivering as I clung delicately to the phone in hand. I had stayed out for hours, clinging to fiction and the possibility of love. But eventually my need to know drove me home: My need to know what would happen, how he would feel, if he could still love me.

“Yes,” he replied, a long pause following his words.

“I need you to come over,” I said, breaking down as I spoke.

“Ok,” he answered, hanging up shortly afterwards. I however, did not. And it wasn’t until the dial tone reminded me I held the receiver, that I finally did. I stumbled over to my couch, having left the door open for him, and waited. The curtains, shadowing one of my visible windows, hovered lifelike in the air. My bathroom door creaked back and forth from the breeze. And the streetlight shone through the crack of my half open, bedroom door; the light stretching all the way to my toes.

I signed the guest book ‘Joan’ and my sister scowled at me. I returned the favor, and walked solemnly in. I stared across the room into the void of people surrounding the casket. The lid was popped open and a frail

white figure lay inside to be viewed by all. Although, strangely enough, when I entered, all eyes shifted to me—judging me, hating me. For a moment I regretted coming, but then I remembered that I had to—I needed to. Dawn trudged in behind me, April respectfully strode and Lillie just walked. Together we accounted for all of the unwanted guests. However, much to the dismay of my father’s business associates and friends, we had veto at this funeral.

I heard a light rattle at my door, and turned to watch Ade enter. He stood before me in an un-tucked dress shirt, having abandoned his jacket and tie. His hands were scratching the bottom of his pockets. We stared at each other for an immeasurable amount of time, silence filling in for everything we were afraid to say to one another. I wanted to speak, and sensed that he wanted me to, but I couldn’t. He walked as heavily inward as anyone suffering a blow could. Falling into an armchair across from me, his eyes turned a corner and he took the initiative.

“Joan, what’s going on?”

I stood motionless, staring at the casket from afar. No one came within ten feet of it, choosing to carry on their distraught conversations at a distance. My aunt wallowed in remorse. My uncle hugged her; held her close. My friends stood behind me. And I approached my father, lying cold in his coffin. The sobs echoed off the walls and each other, as I leaned in to gaze upon the frozen figure of the man and all that I had run from; All that I had tried so hard to refute and deny. My fathers arms were crossed on his chest and his eyes closed. He looked as though he were asleep. A powder that covered his true, pale complexion swallowed his face to an almost unrecognizable degree. But I knew who lay before me, perhaps moreso than

anyone else. The bigot—the liar—the unsympathetic self-indulgent asshole who took all that he failed to give. He looked more alive, in death, than he'd ever bothered to be for me.

“I...” I whispered, screaming in mind. “What your father said was true,” I stated, pulling together the strength to tell something other than a lie—seeing my previously scheduled confession dissolving into the mess of reality.

“I...uh... I still don't understand,” Ade replied, rubbing the back of his neck while he stared blankly at my floor.

“I was born a man,” I exclaimed, hiccupping on distress.

“What?” Ade gasped. Shocked that I had confirmed the one suspicion he would never believe. He held my eyes for a moment, unflinching...horrified. But then he subsided, and his eyelids flickering but never closed while he searched for words. I could see panic consume him, misunderstanding control him, and fear guide him. But I stood ready for the blows, for the torment and torture of losing someone I loved.

April put her hand on my shoulder and leaned against me. Dawn snuck off somewhere when one of the funeral home attendants turned out to be attractive and Lillie fidgeted nervously, hoping that no one would ask him how he knew the deceased. Whereas I... I felt overwhelmed. My emotions demanded both hatred and love. But I fought myself as best I could. I replaced any sign of love with an accentuated disgust for the dead. I hated this man. More than words could tell. I bottled up everything. Corking my eyes, shutting my mouth, silencing my heart. It was all I could do to

remember that remorse is a matter of a loved one lost, not tidings of a fermented past.

I took a deep breath that faltered with feeling. Ade hadn't spoken for long enough to hurt me more than anything he could say. He sat now with his hands pressed together between his knees, furiously contemplating an appropriate reaction. But even composure couldn't help him now. He was as much a victim of his emotions as I would be. When he raised his head to glare at me, I felt terrified. Not of him, but of what I could see. He was lost to me, and all that remained was the shredded shell of the love he once had.

I crept away from the coffin, searching for a place to sit that wasn't surrounded by people who looked down on me. To them I was the failure in the family. The one who survived by my grandfather's fortune, only to squander it on 'useless surgery' and a pointless ideal. I scanned the room frantically, eventually spotting a seat by my condescendingly erratic mother. She stared me down while I approached, hoping that someone she liked better would take the seat first. But I didn't look away. I walked quickly over to her, dropping down onto an ugly, half chair, half bed, funeral seat. She said nothing at first, likely scanning her memory for something about me she could antagonize.

“Why the fuck would you do this?” Ade grumbled, ceasing looking at me all together.

“Because I wanted to love you... I wanted you to love me,” I replied, shakily.

“But you lied to me! All you ever fucking did was lie!” he screamed. Looking up briefly, only to turn away in disgust.

“I’m sorry Ade... I wish I could have told the truth,” I sighed, taking the easy way out.

“Bullshit! You could have told me! You could have said something the minute I approached you! You could have saved me a whole lot of goddamn trouble too!”

“What would you want me to say, Ade? How on earth could I say something like that and ever expect you to accept me?”

“It sure beats being tricked into loving you,” he stated, irefully eying everything but me.

“What do you want?” My mother questioned spitefully, letting out a shrill gasp of indignation when I crossed my shaven legs.

“I want to talk to you mom. Will you let me do that?” I replied, refraining from killing her as best I could.

“Fine, talk,” she said, looking away from me to the floral patterns of the funeral home. She placed her hands on her knees, trying to hide the fact that she had been squeezing the pillows. I could see past the rage and into her sorrow that she kept from me—desperately trying to hide any weakness from someone such as myself.

“Mom, listen to me!” I cried, drawing the momentary and unwanted attention of the people mourning around us.

“I am listening,” she hissed, leaning towards me. She spoke in a low, gritty voice that depicted just how much she despised my coming. Her expression flared of a vulnerable and desperate need to release what was

inside of her. She looked upon me with all of her hatred and grief brewing forth from the tragedy of my father's demise.

"I hope so," I exclaimed, confronting her wild need to erupt upon whomever would dare speak ill to her. "I'm sorry for your loss Mom, I truly am. I'm sorry that my lifestyle choices shamed this family. But, most of all, I'm sorry that my coming here has hurt you more than my father's death," I raged, trying as best I could to keep my voice below the sorrowful moans of the other attendants.

"Well thank you John! Thank you so much for that... heartfelt apology!" she cried sarcastically. "Now I understand why you wasted a fortune! Why you took everything we ever gave you and pissed it away, along with the rest of your life!" she yelled, continuing to dig through everything she held over me, but never had the courage to say. The people around us stopped their conversations and watched as son, daughter and mother fought it out.

"How can you say that I tricked you into loving me?" I whimpered, assuming the role of the one too weak to look upon the other.

"What would you call it?" he shouted. "You flat out lied. You knew perfectly well what was going on and you said nothing. And now what am I supposed to do? Forgive and forget?" he remarked sharply, pacing back and forth to try and shake away his feelings. "I didn't fall in love with you, I fell in love with the person you convinced me you were!"

"But I am that person!" I cried, my head tossing back and forth to try and keep up with his movements. "How can you say that? How can you pretend that you don't love me, just because of this?"

“Just? Just because of this!” he gasped, stuttering in outrage. He scowled harshly, raising his hand to his stomach as though my presence was enough to make him ill. “Just because you’re a man! Just because you lied—which, frankly, I don’t even fucking care about any more! All I care about is getting a goddamn answer so I can get the fuck out of here!”

“Get the fuck out of here, John!” my mother screamed, standing in front of me. Leaning forward so that our noses almost touched, pouring her broken heart out. “Do you have any decency? How can you come here and do this to me! We all know you hated your father, you hated me!” she shouted, shaking her head back and forth like a bulldog barking. “And now you’re here... Is this revenge enough for you?” she cried, tears filling in for words.

“Fuck it!” Ade exclaimed, grabbing a jacket he’d felt comfortable enough to leave with me a week ago. “Knowing isn’t worth staying here,” he stated, walking towards my door. I quickly leaped from my seat and stood in his way with my arms stretched across the exit. He glared at me and tried to push me aside but I refused to budge.

“You’re not leaving, Ade,” I sobbed. “You can’t!”

Our arms flailed above each other’s, in a constant struggle to attain and stop a departure. My tears billowed, blinding me as I tried to explain to deaf ears why nothing had changed. How sorry I was for lying. How it wasn’t anything we couldn’t work through. But I knew he was too short-sighted to see anything but his own refusal to accept what I had told him, to accept me. He screamed at me to get out of his way, and I screamed back that I loved him; that he loved me.

“I’m sorry Ade,” I shrieked, falling to my knees as he passed my desperate attempts to hold on to him. “I’m so sorry... please don’t leave,” I gasped, fighting for air in between sobs and pleas. The door slammed and I was alone.

Some of my father’s associates helped my mother away from me. She had fallen victim to her disarranged sorrow. Nothing but a desperate, distraught, ruined woman remained. People eyed me disapprovingly. Everyone saw it as my fault. But I had done all I could given the circumstances. Her reaction was inevitable, and provoking it made it easier on both of us. I let her resume the old time routine, of treating me as her emotional punching bag, just this once without an opposition. When she disappeared from sight I exhaled everything. I slumped back onto the wall and remained motionless. The night had just begun.

I pulled myself up one last time to rush to the window and watch my love fade. He furiously flipped down the collar of his jacket, never looking back. I clung to the windows edge, until eventually I could see him no longer. I gasped and rolled my eyes into my skull. I released the window and crashed to the floor remaining motionless. I went limp. I had run out of tears but I never stopped crying. I rolled to my side and sprawled out, resting my head on my arm. And then I did nothing. All that love had filled me with was gone, and I was left empty. I stayed there for hours, days. I couldn’t say how long. And in that time, I thought; and thought destroyed me.

Chapter 25

I lay motionless in the dark under my window, caressing the hardwood floor acting as a canvas to the streetlight flooding in. It seemed to touch everything, but I remained on its border—admiring it from afar. I hadn't moved in days. I couldn't have if I'd wanted to. I'd been burned inside, shredded, torn, chewed, destroyed, ruined, and now... now I was fucked. A numbing familiarity crept in the back of my mind, keeping me from sleep, from rest, from peace. Eventually I couldn't fight it any longer and I was forced to review, forced to accept, what I'd been hiding for so long.

The funeral drew sluggishly forward. My friends supported me the best they could, which may as well not have been at all. Except... except for April. She was brilliant. And somewhere in between her understanding and friendly acts, I felt the need to ruin it all by saying something stupid like...

"I love you," I said, alone with April in a distant room. Away from everyone and everything, except our past and my refusal to accept that I wasn't accepted.

"I love you too Joan," April replied, adoringly. Rubbing my back, having interpreted my words as though they'd sprung from the emotion of the night.

“No, I’m still in love with you,” I stated, focusing on her knee. Her arm pulled away from my back, and her from me.

“John, this isn’t the time,” she sighed, staring at the floor when I stared at her. She spoke as though she’d always known. As though everything I’d done and worked towards in my life had been for her and that I still fought solely for her affection. The kind of self indulgent inane rationalization I’d expect from one of Dawn’s ill-timed jokes.

“Why did you do that? Why did you call me John just now?” I asked, subduing outrage and giving into whatever it would take to try and get answers from her.

“I don’t know,” she muttered, pausing for a long time.

“What happened?” I questioned, resting my elbows on my knees and my mind on a feeling. “I need to know why you don’t love me.”

“I told you.”

“But even now... how can you still feel that way?” I asked, referring to her revelations of lesbianism.

“I just do. I’m sorry if I can’t explain it, but I know how I feel.”

“Did you ever stop to think about the reason you loved me? Before you knew you were a lesbian, before you broke up with me, before any of that?”

“Yes, and it’s because of those things that I still do love you. But not the way you love me,” she stated, a slow tune started to play in the background that sounded like make out music from a local radio station.

“Did you ever stop to think that maybe there’s nothing you can do about it? That I’m the one who changed?”

“No, I know you’ve changed April; of course I know that,” I exclaimed, smiling briefly. “But I don’t think you realize that I did, too.”

“It’s kind of hard to miss,” she chuckled, thinking that my smile meant it wasn’t as serious as I’d made it out to be.

“No... no!” I cried, quickly sitting upright. “You think that this is change? That it hasn’t been there all along?”

“Are you joking?” she gasped, surprised at my sudden rush of conviction.

“April haven’t you even considered that the reason you loved me, that the reason you didn’t even know you were a lesbian is because I am a woman?” I exclaimed, catching her eye for the first time in the conversation.

“It’s not just that, it was a physical thing,” she stated, knowing how I would object.

“Look at me April, really look,” I explained, trying to impress upon her the reality of the situation. “I finally look the way I am. So, yes, I’ve changed, but then again not at all. If it were a ‘physical thing,’ it wouldn’t matter now. So what is it?” I asked with a silence that drowned out everything following my words. She looked at me as though she’d been wounded. As though something inside of her hurt so much that she wouldn’t dare speak to me, or I might feel the same. I looked away, sensing that she never did. “I just don’t understand,” I muttered, shaking my head.

“Neither do I,” she replied, taking my hand. She held it close to her, using her thumb to massage it. “But I’ll always be your friend,” she stated, practically slapping me in the face. I thought long and hard about her in the time that followed. I thought about how she couldn’t explain how she felt other than that she did. How I was a friend, but still kept at a distance. And I

wondered how this had happened to two people who were once so deeply in love.

Lying on my floor, cramped up against the wall I started to see things clearly. I understood why April couldn't love me. Why she wouldn't tell me what she thought, and why she called me John. It was obvious now, and maybe it was then, too. But I would never have admitted it. I had too much to lose. So if she didn't buy into who I am, because of who she is, then we didn't matter. And the only love that remained was residual. Apparent through my fixation on an ideal that was truthfully a lie.

She walked out of sight, but never out of mind. I was left alone in the room, eying the various ornamental horrors. The oil paintings reminiscent of the ones you'd see in a carnival's haunted house. The miscellaneous Chinese standees, that had no religious or decorative significance other than to annoy. Even the furniture scolded the eyes; being more depressing than the night itself. I left eventually, collecting my fair share of disconcerting glances and scowls. My sister escorted my mother, who pretended not to notice me when she left. I plucked Lillie gleefully from his conversation about my father, while April waited in the car. Dawn strutted into view just as the make-out music stopped and everything was accounted for except resolve.

When I arrived home I climbed the stairs to my apartment, slapping my palm against the railing to make a deep thud that echoed through the hall. It had reached that time of night where repetition sets in, and the hours that would follow are the same as their predecessors. The door to my building shut behind me, making its usual vacuum seal sound. I thought intently about the night and how things went. But, moreso, of how I would have liked them to go. When I reached my apartment I lifted up my keys to

open the door, but noticed that I had no need as the lock was broken. I gasped for a moment, slowly shoving my door forward to see if anyone was inside. And, as what I could only assume to be my apartment came into view, so did my heart sink.

My living room contained now only shattered remains of the life I once knew. The rest had been stolen from me. I scanned the place thoroughly, awestruck by the sight. The last remaining possessions of money I would never again have, were gone. Anything of sentiment was destroyed. And all that I could see now was chaos. I stumbled forward, feeling ill. I fell against my wall and slid down until I came to rest with my head facing my bedroom. From where I sat all I could see were my sister's clogs and a pair of pickled private parts. And then, with the light streaming past me, I cried.

Chapter 26

I opened my eyes to see a bare ankle sporting a tattoo of Tweety giving Sylvester head. A pair of legs clothed in Hugo Boss slouched by my doorway. Smoke hovered out the entrance, and a cigarette could be seen in a hand. My focus remained on peeling my face off of the floor, but I gave up half way. The foot in front of me poked me a few times. I let out mumbled moans of recognition, shutting my eyes once again. I then felt a hard kick to my side that made me open my eyes, look up, and scowl.

“What the fuck do you want Lillie?” I groaned, rolling onto my back. He stood over me, with his hands on his hips; staring down while making a face that, in my current state, I couldn’t interpret to be anything other than aggravating. “Just leave me alone,” I muttered, glancing at Dawn standing in my doorway.

“So you can lie here for the rest of your life? Sorry I don’t have that kind of time. I want my friend back,” he stated, hoisting me off the ground as both he and Dawn abducted me with the intent of delivering me to breakfast.

They hauled me downstairs, my feet smacking on the steps since they practically carried me. They tried to make chitchat but the only thing they could get out of me were muffled swears, condemning them for their deed. In the restaurant, a few blocks down, they slid me into the end of a booth. Dawn was planted next to me so that I couldn’t escape, and Lillie took the spotlight before my glare.

“Menu?” Dawn asked, sticking one in front of me while I stared half-depressed, half-infuriated at Lillie. I knew it was his idea to come and get me. I knew it would probably be good for me. But I also knew that I didn’t want to bother with what I knew. I just wanted to rant, rage, piss and shit all over everything. “No?” he chuckled, as my eyes slid over to glare at him. “Alright, I guess I’ll just order for you.”

“This isn’t helping,” I grumbled, under my breath.

“Well it’s helping a hell of a lot more than you crucifying yourself to your floor,” Lillie commented, flipping delicately through his menu. “I mean you look like shit, Joan. And I’m not using a euphemism here. You look like actual shit; did some of your floor polish rub off onto your shirt?”

“So, what, did you bring me here to insult me?” I snapped. Disgruntled and growing more and more impatient with Dawn, who was pawing at a brown stain on my shirt. “Fuck off Dawn!” I cried sharply, smacking away his hand.

“No, we didn’t bring you here to ‘insult you,’” Lillie explained, looking up from a picture of blueberry stuffed, Belgian waffles. “We brought you here to try and get you back into your routine and, more importantly, out of your apartment.”

“Why? What right do you have to infringe yourselves upon me?”

“Oh shut up, Joan,” Lillie bitched, waiting for the real me to take hold. “It’s one thing to say you need time to try and recuperate, but quite another to say that we’re at fault. We’re here because we care about you and can’t stand to see you locked up for another week doing nothing but feeling sorry for yourself.”

“What’s wrong with that? Everyone needs time after loss,” I exclaimed, fending off Dawn’s knee that continually bumped against mine.

“True. But generally, that time produces some sort of progress, not further regress. If all you’re doing is pouting and bitching, then you’re better off doing it in front of us. At least then you’ll be out of the house,” Lillie stated gleefully, the tone of which I still wasn’t on par with.

“Whatever,” I mumbled, my stomach growling, much to my dismay. I fell into a need to be quiet as my motives for bottling myself up began to falter. I felt a buried warmth stir inside of me, but I quickly punched it into submission and told myself I wasn’t going to play along or eat; both of which I wanted desperately to do.

“So, are you going to tell us what happened?” Lillie inquired, leaning towards me, anticipating tears and my blubbering confession. I stared dully at him, pretending to see through him. “Hello?” he said, waving his hand back and forth in front of my face. “If you don’t want to talk we can set up a system of blinks,” Lillie joked. “Well, I’ll take it by your face that it was similar to what happened with April,” Lillie stated, as I listened flinching in agony. The waitress came up a moment later. She looked back and forth between us while giving her best half-assed ‘hello,’ likely for the thousandth time that morning. She asked what we all wanted, starting with Lillie, then Dawn. But just as Dawn opened his mouth, to say what I was having, I interrupted him.

“I want a lot of bacon, some hash browns and as much of a cow as you can fit under a bun,” I cried, saying this with such high-pitched conviction that not only did the waitress stare at me, but everyone in the restaurant as well.

“Is... that everything?” she asked stuttering, standing frozen in fear/wonder/confusion. We all nodded in unison and she walked quickly away. I turned to face Lillie who now displayed a bit of angst for bringing me out of my depression-soaked cocoon prematurely.

“It wasn’t ‘similar’ to April, it was the same fucking thing all over again,” I explained, combining muttered remarks with momentary outbursts of emotion. “Only this time it was worse. This time it was the complete affirmation of everyone’s feelings. There wasn’t any debate whether or not he would stay. There wasn’t any second thought or even contemplation. There was only disgust. And I’m getting sick and fucking tired of hearing that from the people I love,” I blubbered, in confession. “So what do you think Lillie? What did you want to know that you couldn’t have guessed when you found me laying on my floor?”

“I’m not ignorant and I’m not stupid,” Lillie stated calmly, regarding my attack on his act. “And I’m not interested in hearing anything you don’t want to tell me,” he explained, as our eyes dueled with one another’s. “I’m here, same as Dawn; not because we need to know what happened or because we want to kiss and make it all better, because we can’t. We’re here because of you. And all we want is to know what you need, so we can try and do it.”

“I don’t know what I need... I don’t fucking know,” I moaned, rubbing my temples, staring blankly at a placemat featuring a tiny biscuit smothered in gravy. “It’s the same shit, different fan. And it’s so goddamn depressing,” I explained, giving into my need to open up. To say and hear something other than my subconscious reassuring me of just how pathetic I was. “I mean I know I shouldn’t have lied to him. But that didn’t even seem to matter. He was just so fixated on... on my past that he completely forgot that he loved me. Like all of a sudden my sex was a requisite of the love we already had,” I sighed, slumping down into my chair more and more as I spoke. Lillie then reached forward and held my hand, frail and vulnerable as it was.

“Honey, the fact of the matter is, if he were any kind of man he’d know to love you for who you are, not who you were,” Lillie stated sincerely,

giving me a look that made me believe, above all else, that he understood. His expression was delicate and soothing. He caressed me with his eyes and made me feel that everything was going to be all right. Dawn's knee came to rest upon mine again, and I realized that it was his playful way of trying to be supportive. My friends gave me hope. I suddenly felt a wave of overpowering emotion spew forth disguised as tears. To Dawn and Lillie my outburst was one invoked by sorrow, but to me it was the recognition of the understanding and support I needed so desperately. Love had not escaped me.

Chapter 27

When I arrived home I no longer dwelled on the silence. I no longer thought of how I had lied to win Ade's affection, only to lose it when he discovered who I had been. Instead, I felt an overpowering surge of confidence. A revelation of the person I had aspired to be, but never realized I had become. And, moreso, of what I would do and where I would go.

The rest of the breakfast had been a pleasant experience. An experience that, save for a miracle, I'd thought impossible. My friends had helped me, and I thanked them repeatedly for it. I was still wounded and scarred by Ade's departure, but I was no longer victim to it. I refused to return to the spot on the floor, outlined with my figure. I wouldn't give in to self-pity and doubt. Today, I would cleanse myself of my past and everything that had held me back.

I stormed into my room and frantically sought out pictures of April and Ade. I tossed them onto a dirty old sheet that I had used to sheave the floor when painting. I threw away the memory of our first date, of a weekend retreat to the beach. Of everything I had to commemorate their deceit—their inability to accept, let alone understand, who I am. I flung a frame of an ideal in the air and laughed as it crashed to the ground. I saw things clearly now and relief consumed me. Stupidity subsided and truth appeared. I no longer denied April's doubt, or Ade's fury. I no longer saw love filling in for the holes in my life. Quite the contrary, I thought, when ripping my loves from a picture of me.

It occurred to me that, prior to that point, I had merely been a figure of someone I sought to become. Reveling in love and denial. Feeding from others to fulfill myself. But even that was wrong. Such thoughts were accentuated simplifications of what I truly felt. I knew that I was rash and quick to judge. I knew that I was caught in the storm of feeling unleashed upon myself when emotion returned. And so my haste subsided and I stopped my rant. I looked around at a torn apartment and sat upon my bed to think slowly, as thought is best.

When I seriously contemplated why love had eluded me; for the first time my conclusion was the fault of someone other than myself. I recognized my desperation, my need to be loved. And, in doing so, I could unravel the problems at hand. I could distinguish between the self-destructive, idealistic, euphoria that I had seen in love; and the reality of the complicated mess and dashed dreams, in its pursuit. I could see past the folly of my ways and those of my loves. I forgave every wrong done to me, as I had wronged myself. I knew now that an epiphany was imminent. And, in that, I realized that the task at hand was missing the point.

I scrambled to my feet and dashed to my closet, once again in a flurry of resolve. I dug through skirts and blouses eventually seeing my foe. It glared back at me with its one mutilated eye, and I hesitated for a moment. But that very moment only accentuated my realization of how wrong I had been. How stupid I had become. I leaned in and picked up my penis. It floated about, back and forth in its jar, seemingly an artifact of a life abandoned. And yet I had held it. I had kept it near me, and with me at all times, even in mind. I had failed to realize its lingering presence. Its constant barrage of influence, keeping me from myself. What I needed was to disavow the past. To swallow everything that the world thought I was and shit out the beautiful bouquet of who I am today.

I carried my penis to the bathroom and set it down atop my toilet. I flung open my window and looked down at the freshly unraveled sleeping bags belonging to Mark and Tim; having recently returned from their Canadian adventure. I caught eye of them walking up to my building's door. Determined to rid myself of my appendage, before embracing my friends once more, I turned towards my circumcised circumscription; eagerly anticipating it's demise.

I picked up the jar and glared into its depths. The penis floated, utterly repulsing me at the very sight of it. And with that I flung it outside to smash on the opened lid of the dumpster. Fragments and juice sprayed in every direction. The shattered glass created a booming echo that's impact was surpassed only by its farewell and my good riddance. Mark's sleeping bag lay victim to a large degree of the splatter, but all I could do was laugh gleefully.

I watched for a moment as the residue from the blast disappeared along with my dick. I then tucked my head back inside and closed the window. After walking to my room, I breathed a sigh of relief and collapsed on my bed—thinking happy thoughts. That song, 'Can't Always Get What You Want,' by the Rolling Stones played in my mind and I smiled. I felt the enlightened calm similar to the way you see things after a really great fuck. I turned, hearing the doorbell ring; sitting up to look out my window—past the streetlight.

Exhale.

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