

The Complete Series



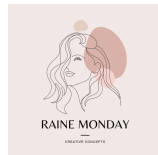
Metempsychosis
Apotheosis

Raine Monday

METEMPSYCHOSIS APOTHEOSIS

The Complete Series

Raine Monday



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CHAPTER one

When I came home she had that look on her face, that look that told me she had good news, not kind of good, or interesting, but REALLY good news. Her lips were drawn in a line, her eyebrows were arched and her blue eyes danced with carefully held excitement, mirth, and joy. It was one of my favorite looks, and I loved coming home to her.

"Looks like someone has good news," I said, setting my briefcase down on the table near the door. I was a mid-level administrator in a large insurance company in downtown Los Angeles. I made a decent living, when combined with Karyn's online business we earned a moderate level income to afford the three bedroom ranch style house in suburban LA.

"How was your day?" She asked, practically bursting. I knew she was dying to tell me whatever-it-was, but always wanted to give me a chance to speak about my day first. It was because she loved me.

"It was fine, hon. Tell me your news, I can practically see you peeing your panties over it."

"I won the contest, Robbie!" She said, giggling and clapping her hands like a schoolgirl.

I frowned. She entered a LOT of contests, some bonfide, some not-so. I was always the skeptic.

She spun her apple laptop around, showing me the blinking "WINNER" screen. "All expense paid trip to the Maldives!" She practically squealed.

I frowned. I hated playing the "Devil's Advocate" but she'd nearly fallen for all kinds of online scams and frauds. Once, she had nearly bankrupted us when she fell for email that said she had won the "El-Gordo Sweepstake Lottery" and to contact the "Claims Agent" and not to let the public know until the "claim could be processed." It had taken me all of about 20 seconds to figure out the award was a scam, but she was already on the phone and about to give them our bank account information when I snatched it from her and hung up the call.

I looked over the announcement blinking in red, scanning it quickly. I grabbed my smartphone and entered "Maldives Sweepstakes Scam." And almost immediately, there was link to Snopes. I read through the Snopes article and saw the green indicator at the bottom that it was a legitimate offer.

"So you actually entered the contest?" I said. "It wasn't just some random drawing or whatever?"

"No!" She said. "We had to submit ten blog articles with references and our blog address. Robbie, they choose ten bloggers to visit the Maldives and blog about our time there!"

"But you don't have a travel blog," I said.

Karyn was a makeup guru. She had posted hundreds of articles, videos, and entries on makeup tips, tricks, tutorials and more. She even had her

own line of cosmetics and did two launches a year that netted us tens of thousands of dollars.

"That's just it, darling, they don't want just travel bloggers. They want mommy bloggers, tech bloggers, animal bloggers...makeup bloggers." She gave me her 100 watt smile that always lit me up inside. "I'll be doing my usual blog but from the Maldives!" Get it?"

"Ohhh," I said, totally not getting it.

"Look, think of it this way." She took my hand, and led me to the couch. "I have my two hundred thousand followers, and add that to Payton Pammie the Mommie blogger's four hundred thousand followers. We both do a blog, blahblahblah from the Maldives. Multiply that by 10 bloggers, and suddenly millions upon millions of eyes are watching us all make content in their backyard. People start thinking, 'OMG, those colors are spectacular there in the Maldives and Karyn looks SO good standing there, I totally want to go there too!"

"Oh, so it's "come to the Maldives" without publishing a single blog about "go to the Maldives." I said. "It's Karyn Adamson is so cool and gorgeous IN the Maldives; can't you see yourself there too?"

"YES! Now you get it Robbie!" She gave me a passionate kiss.

"Mmm," I said, pulling her to me tightly. "I think I like "getting it."

She smiled her small secret smile that I knew was just for me. "But wait, there's more!"

"No!" I said, in faux excitement.

"As part of the all expenses paid trip, we also get one on one access to Richie Z, internet marketer extraordinaire!"

I gasped. "Say it ain't so!"

She slapped me playfully. "He's only like a mega-millionaire and he will work one-on-one with each of us to best leverage our market, our content, our positioning and our branding!"

"Sounds interesting," I smiled. "Especially the positioning." I kissed her neck, pressing my body to her tightly, feeling myself growing aroused at her very presence.

We'd been together for six years all told. It had been instant chemistry. She was sassy and bold, clever and witty, all rolled into a gorgeous blond, five foot ten inch package. She knew all the best makeup tricks to keep her looking fine no matter what circumstance she might be in.

"And that's not all!" She said, adopting her showgirl voice. "You and a friend get all this, the week long trip, the cruise, the working with Richie Z! Absolutely free!"

I bit my lip at that. "Mmmm, and when is this amazing journey to take place?"

"Next month!" She hugged me tight. "So we can finally take that honeymoon we always wanted!"

I sighed and stepped away. I ran my fingers over my face and through my hair. We'd been in the weeds preparing for an audit next month and I was leading the team on creating the package we'd show the auditors. It was crucial that the company minimize our audit findings in order for the shareholders to retain their confidence in us as an admin team.

She watched me and immediately deflated. "I knew it."

"It's an audit, honey. I don't plan these things."

"So you have to be at work."

I nodded.

She shrugged, and I could tell she was about to cry.

I took her hands, and pulled her into my arms. "Look, I'll try, I promise. Maybe I can get out of it."

I didn't think I could. In fact I knew I couldn't, short of exiting the company completely. I was in charge, for fucks' sake, so I had to see it through.

She stomped her foot a little, trying to hold back the tears. "No, it's okay. It's your job, I don't blame you for not going, I knew it was kinda last minute and just kinda hoped—"

"I know, and believe me I want to go." I took her back into my arms. "The thought of Richie Z working 'one on one' with my gorgeous wife gives me chills in all the wrong ways."

"It's just work, babe. You know I'd never leave you." She frowned, sighing, turning away from me and I could tell she was disappointed.

"Shya," I enfolded her in my arms. "Until Richie Z comes in and kisses your neck, just how you like." I leaned in, brushed her long hair back and kissed her right where the neck met jaw, then licked and nibbled my way up. She moaned softly, arching her neck.

"Babbyyy, you know what that does to me." She shivered.

"And then Richie says in a French accent; 'You are mine, babee, I need you like no one else needs you.'"

"Richie doesn't speak French, goofball." She giggled.

"He would for you, I'm sure."

She wrapped her arms around my neck, and I could tell she was aroused. "Is that so?"

"Mmmhmmm. And then he'd lift you up, like this..." I lifted her up into the air, so her legs wrapped around my waist. "And then he'd walk you to

the bedroom like this..." I started walking tipping to the left and to the right as Karyn giggled, hanging on to me.

"Then he'd lay you back, and part your legs like this..." I spread her legs, sliding her leggings down and lowering my head.

"Then he'd say; 'Zis is zee most gorgeous puzzy I haz ever zeen."

I licked one side, then the other side of her labial lips, letting my tongue flicker on her hood, then dancing across her clitoris lightly.

"You're such...a...goofball..." she moaned slightly, spreading her legs even more.

I was too busy to reply, my tongue danced lightly over her clitoris as I felt her vagina grow wet with arousal. I plunged my tongue in deep, sucking her box into my mouth, and letting my tongue spear into her tight opening. I loved the way she tasted, love how her pussy felt, and loved how she writhed beneath me.

"Oh, Richie!" She exclaimed. "Oh my god, fuck me now, Richie Fuck me!"

I stopped a moment shucking my pants down.

"I Richie Z shall fuck zee, Karyn Zzzaget unteel your eyez roll up in zee head."

"Mmmmm," she moaned loudly. "Do it Richie, NOW!"

I slid my cock into my wife as she moaned, pulling me onto her. She began to writhe and grind as I thrust into her.

"Plant your...mighty...seed...Oh my god...in me...Richie..." she gasped as I slowly ground my cock into her deeply.

Playtime was over.

The next morning, Karyn woke me before she started her first webcast. She liked to get an early start on the day, so I blinked and yawned, glancing at the time. Four AM.

"What, babe?"

"Do you mind if I go on the trip with Brandon?"

I frowned. "Wha' trip?"

"The trip to the Maldives!" She hit me on the shoulder.

"Sorry, it's like o'dark thirty."

"The time I usually get up. So do you mind?"

"Brandon still gay as a bag of popcorn?"

"Yes, Jesus. You think I'd go with a straight guy?"

"I dunno, I heard you fucking Richie what's his name last night."

"Mmmm, he was so good too. His cock was top-notch. At least a 3000."

"Good thing *my* cock is at least a 5000 or I might be jealous."

"Mmm, baby...I hate to tell you this..."

"Hm?" I wrapped her up in my arms. She smelled good, of perfume and hair product, toothpaste and laundry detergent.

"Your cock is at least a 5001!"

"OH EM GEE!" I squealed.

"I know, right? It's our secret though."

I kissed her in her favorite place, and she shivered. "Stop it I have to work."

"Mmmm, well. Daddy wants nookie."

"Daddy gonna have to wait until after the webcast. Honey, answer me, please? I want to tell my audience I'm going on the Maldives trip."

I inhaled, breathing her in. I could never really say no to her, and she knew it. I loved Karyn, adored her, worshiped the ground she walked on.

"Of course."

"You're positive? You won't get all morose and despondent like you do?"

"Hey, wait a minute, Missy!" I pulled back with mock concern on my face. "I'll have you know that every time I've been morose and despondent it's been due to lack of you. I, otherwise, am fairly lackadaisical, and *lassaiz faire*."

"I know, baby." She stood up. "It's only a week though, so you can keep being your lackadaisical self and not descend into despair, despondency and immorality?"

"I can promise at least two of the three."

She giggled. "So you'll be immoral and despondent but not despair?"

"With tinges of *lassaiz faire*, though not too much. Without you, I'm rather *lassaiz morosité*."

"Goofball."

"Yes, you can go."

She gave a squeal.

"You'll have to make it up to me, though."

"Oh, I will, that I promise you baby." She kissed me, careful not to smudge her perfect lipstick. "Okay, gotta go. Love you!"

And in a flash, she was gone.

I inhaled her aroma again, already missing her and dreading the week of her being gone. I would be good though, absence made the heart grow fonder, I supposed. I could spend some time with my older brother who I rarely spent time anymore.

Sighing, I slipped down into the covers, closing my eyes. I remembered our wedding, the way she felt when we danced, the way the sunlight

glimmered on her then dark-brown hair. I never knew I could feel such powerful emotions for someone, anyone, but she'd stolen my heart.

I just hoped this trip was all she wanted it to be, and not some gimmick to get her down to the Maldives where they'd take advantage of her. She was so gullible, her heart was open to anyone she met, and she wore every emotion she ever felt on her sleeve. She had such an open and giving heart, I'd hate for anything or anyone to tarnish that.

I thought about Brandon and her together. Brandon was her style coach, adviser, and closest 'girlfriend.' He was actually a pretty cool guy, with a solid head on his shoulders so if she was to go to the Maldives with someone other than me, Brandon would be who I'd send. He saw through any scam, knew the ins and outs of the human mind, and was sarcastic to the core of his dark soul.

He also was in love with...someone. Who had Karyn said was the latest crush?

Oh, right, Dalton Dells. Ugh, Brandon was another common friend, but where Brandon actually *liked* people, Dalton hated everyone he met. Well, Except Karyn. Secretly, I think Dalton wanted to *be* Karyn.

I fell asleep again, thinking of the three of them and wondering what kind of food they'd serve in the Maldives. I hoped they'd have double-shot Espresso with caramel, or Karyn was going to be one sad girl.

CHAPTER TWO

For seven days, I heard nothing.

People might think I shouldn't have worried, she was in the Maldives, she was having fun, stop being so dramatic.

But people didn't know Karyn. Karyn couldn't make it through a morning without speaking to me.

I attempted to call her cellphone after the first few hours after she landed. It went straight to voice-mail however, Karyn's perky voice saying: 'Hi! Sorry I'm not here, but leave a message and you know what to do!'

I'd left dozens of messages. I'd sent her email. I stalked her social media. I called the organizers of the event and was told she had made it to the Maldives, was having an amazing time, and wished I was there. I was told gently, but firmly there was to be no outside contact for the week.

I also tried Brandon's phone, social media, and contacts and nothing. I sent emails, and once again was told gently, but firmly, Brandon Grainger had arrived safely, was having a good time, and wished I was there.

It was eerie, to say the least. I didn't sleep for the entire week. I pictured all kinds of dark scenarios in my head. Round trip tickets ranged from \$1500 to \$2000.00. Of course work was nuts with the audit, but I actually didn't care, and was cited for failing to appear to several of the appointments.

I went from driving myself nuts about it to talking myself out of cashing in every bit of savings I had and flying down there. Myself kept saying: Self, you read the instructions. They were going to be completely off-grid for the duration. If you were so worried about it, she invited you to go and you declined the invitation.

So that's why I was anxiously waiting at the airport, one week later.

Everyone exiting the plane looked a bit subdued and quiet. I expected them all to be laughing and reminiscing. I saw Brandon first.

"Hey man! I've been worried sick! Where's Karyn?"

He looked at me, frowning, then nodded. "Oh, hello Robert."

I blinked. Brandon hadn't called me...hell, NOBODY called me Robert. "Brandon, where's Karyn?"

At that moment, she came into view walking down the jet-bridge, and I sighed. My baby was home.

I waved as she approached. She looked at me and smiled in a strange sort of way, like she wasn't expecting to see me.

"Hello," she said approaching.

"Hello? I said, smiling. "That's all I get. Come here you!" I leaned over and picked her up, spinning her around.

"Put me down, put me down, put me down." She shook her head as I sat her back on her feet. She seemed a bit unsteady.

"Are you okay, Babe?"

She frowned a bit, then nodded. "Yes, I'm fine. Are those for me?" she held out her hand.

I looked down at the flowers I was holding. "Yes, of course."

I put them in her hand and she smelled them, then smiled. "Can we go home?"

"I thought you'd never ask!"

Brandon walked off without another word. I shook my head. That was very strange, something funny was definitely going on.

We walked to the car, and she acted strange like she hadn't seen it before, almost walking past it until she saw me unlocking my door.

She gave a soft "Oh, I didn't know this was it."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing," she said, looking out the window.

I shut the door and put the car in reverse, then pulled out of the airport parking and onto the freeway.

"Okay, spill. What the fuck is going on?"

"What do you mean?"

"What do you mean, what do I mean. What the hell is up with you, and why did Brandon act like he didn't even know you?"

"Brandon?"

"Yes, for fuck's sake. Karyn, tell me what happened. Did you two have a fight or something?"

She paused a moment, still staring out the window. "Yes. A fight. Yes."

She didn't say anything else.

"Well?"

"Well, what?"

"Jesus Christ, what's gotten into you? Are you jet-lagged?"

She paused again. "Yes, darling. I'm sorry. I'm jet-lagged. I just need to sleep."

I sighed. "Of course, we'll get home soon."

Silently we drove through the streets as the rain started to come down. I turned on the windshield wipers and then the radio.

She didn't touch the station, just sat silently looking out the window. Normally, my gorgeous and gregarious wife would have been chattering on about how much fun she'd had, what she'd seen, who she'd talked to. All the things from the week that had stuck in her mind and needed to be set free. She would have changed the radio from my station of soft jazz to pop, without asking or thinking. She'd have jumped up and down at the flowers, taking it as a definitive exhibition of my love, and we would have joked about it all the way home.

Not this quiet, sedate person sitting next to me. Something major must have happened. Something...terrible? She wasn't sad, she was alert, but for all the world it seemed like she was...shy, around me. Did something happen between her and Brandon? Did they have a torrid love affair and she didn't want to tell me?

We pulled up to the house and she waited quietly for me to get her luggage, and walk up the walk to the front door. I unlocked the house, and Rex came barging up. I assumed Karyn would have squealed and greeted him, throwing her arms around him, but she shied away from our retriever, hiding herself.

"It's okay, he's just happy to see you."

She nodded, still hiding behind me.

"Rex! Settle down. She'll pet you when she's ready."

The dog stopped wagging his tail and whining and sat staring up at us. I walked into the living room and threw the keys on the table.

"I got steaks for us tonight, and some of that red wine you like."

She nodded. "I think I just want to lie down."

"Sure honey. I'll put Rex outside and be in there in a minute."

She nodded and walked down the hallway, looking in every room.

I gripped the dog's collar and dragged him to the back door. He whimpered a little.

"I know, buddy, but I don't know what's going on either. As soon as I know, you'll know."

After shutting the door, I went back to the master bedroom, but I didn't see Karyn on the bed. Frowning, I looked and found her lying on the guest bed, fully clothed, on the comforter.

Her eyes were closed. I was surprised, she hated sleeping in her clothes. She always stripped naked before sleeping, even if she was only going to take a catnap.

I slid in beside her, happy to at least feel her again. I leaned in and kissed her neck, in her favorite place, and she mumbled something and turned away from me.

It had sounded like a different language. I shook my head.

Something wasn't right.

CHAPTER THREE

Karyn slept all night and long into the next day. I called in sick to the office.

She awoke near noon, and I had long prepared a tray with a breakfast of fruit, poached eggs, and juiced kale/orange/quava tonic.

"I've prepared the Lady and extra-ordinary breakfast." I said, adopting a playful tone.

"You will notice the bread is lightly toasted, the juice is fresh, ah, juiced, and the egg is poached exactly 2.5 minutes. Bon Appetit."

She sat up, rubbing sleep from her eyes and frowned. "Oh, thank you."

I held her Macbook Pro to her. "I'm sure you'll want to check in on social media. The world has basically stopped turning while you were away."

She nodded and took it, but set it down without opening.

I watched her carefully, giving her my best smile.

Taking a drink of the juice, she winced, but drank a little anyway. She did eat the egg, and some of the fruit but that was all. Again, odd behavior, my wife was usually ravenous in the mornings.

"So, tell me. What happened?"

"I'm still tired, Robert, I don't want to go into it."

"Robert? Who's Robert?"

She frowned. "Bob?"

I stood up. "I want you to tell me what the fuck is going on. Right now."

She shook her head, not wanting to look at me.

"You don't call me by my name, you barely even register poor Rex, Brandon walks away without a goodbye. What the fuck?"

She stood up and walked to the bathroom, shutting the door.

"Look, honey, I don't care what happened, okay? If you and Brandon fucked or whatever, just tell me and we can put it behind us!"

No response from the door. I turned the knob. It was locked.

"Baby, just tell me what's going on. I don't understand what's gotten into you. What did they do to you on that trip?"

"Leave me alone." She said in a quiet voice.

I bit my lip. Over the course of our time together, Karyn had taught me that when she needed space she got it. No questions asked.

I raised my hand to bang on the door but realized that would probably be the wrong thing to do. It would ignite her temper and send her into a fury, and that was not how I envisioned the first day back to be.

But she was acting so strange! I still couldn't connect the dots.

I swallowed my temper. "Okay. I'm going to go into the office. If you need anything call me, okay?"

No answer.

I walked out the door and got into the car. I pounded the steering wheel a few times and roared my fury, anger, and frustration into the silence.

Turning the key in the ignition, I backed out of our driveway. I wasn't going into the office, I was going to go see Brandon.

Brandon Pyle lived in an apartment on the east side of town. It was on the second floor, and I knew where it was because we'd been to several Christmas parties at his apartment.

I could hear thumping bass coming from behind his front door as I approached. I knocked on it, firmly, so he could hear me.

A woman answered. She had disheveled dark hair. "Que?"

"Um, sorry. Is Brandon here?"

She frowned at me. "*No comprende.*"

I heard a voice from inside the apartment. "¿Quién es?"

She spoke back to whoever it was.

"Brandon!" I said, in a loud voice. "I need to speak to you! It's Robbie!"

The door opened wider, and Brandon stood behind the woman, wearing nothing but a bed sheet tied around his waist. "Um...what you want?"

"What's going on?" I said. "Did something happen in the Maldives? Karyn isn't acting like herself."

"Um...she probly...you know, tired, Ese. Very busy in Maldives, that's all."

He wrapped his arms around the woman and kissed her neck. She shivered and grinned, turning in his arms.

"Where's Dalton?"

He looked at me with confusion on his face. Then recognition came. "Oh...uh. We broke up. I'm with Maria now." He ran his hands over the front of her body and she moaned softly.

"Wait, Brandon. What exactly happened down there?" I said, my voice rising.

"She just tired, Ese. Don' you worry, she be right in a few days."

He swung the door closed in my face as he lifted the woman up into his arms. She giggled and I could hear them thumping their way away from the front door.

What the actual fuck? I thought, standing there looking at the peephole in the door. Brandon had been gay, proudly gay. We went to pride parades with him and he volunteered at the young men's shelter.

I returned home to find Karyn sitting on the couch and watching TV. She seemed to be engrossed in a soap opera and I couldn't help but notice she had several discarded food cartons and boxes strewn over the coffee table.

"What are we watching," I said sitting in a chair opposite. She was drinking coke from a can, which meant she must have gone out because we didn't have soda anywhere in the house.

"Day's of Living." She spoke in a quiet voice.

"I didn't know you liked soap operas."

She didn't reply, just continued to watch as she ate potato chips and drank the soda. She hadn't put on any makeup and her hair was caught up in a ponytail high on her head. It made her look much younger than usual, and I kind of liked the look, it was a much more natural appearance for her being without perfect face, and perfect hair. She sat on the couch eating potato chips and drinking a coke. Under normal circumstances I might have seen this as a gift from the Gods...she spent a LOT of money on self-care, so for her to be so...normal, was a bit refreshing actually.

But it wasn't Karyn.

This was completely out of character for her, as if someone had replaced Karyn, or was wearing her appearance somehow.

Just like Brandon.

"So what did you want to do tonight?"

Karyn just looked at me with a somewhat blank expression on her face.

"Want to go out, eat Italian, maybe catch a movie at the Cineplex?"

She shook her head and returned her gaze to the TV screen.

At least she was out of the bedroom, so progress, right?

I sighed and went into the kitchen and made a sandwich. I returned with one for her and set it on a plate in front of her then sat in the chair to watch the inane soap operas. Karyn didn't say anything, didn't move from her position. She ate her sandwich, watched soap operas, and then when the clock struck 10 PM, she got up and went to bed.

I turned off the lights, locked the doors, then walked down the hall to find her under the covers of the guest bedroom. She was already asleep.

I went into the master bedroom and turned on the light.

Booting up my laptop I completed the day's projects that had piled up in my inbox since my mind was occupied on other things. I worked for hours, writing emails, editing documents, and sending them up the line, so at least my job wouldn't be in jeopardy.

Near 2 am, I rubbed my eyes and sighed. As I was leaning over to turn off the light, something chimed on my laptop.

J3327i hi are you there?

It was an old chat client I rarely used anymore. I didn't recognize J3327i, and the profile was completely blank. I thought it was probably a prank, or a catfish, but with all the strangeness in my life lately, I thought why not make it stranger still?

RAdamson: yes

J3327i: omg, hi. This is Karyn, they've done something to me. I can't explain right now, they'll catch me on this computer

RAdamson: How do I know this is really you?

J3327i: Ask me something only Karyn would know?

I thought about it. Wedding? First Kiss? First Date? Hmmm...

RAdamson: Why did we almost get divorced on our wedding day?

J3327i: omg, because you left your wallet at the restaurant! There was \$2700 in wedding checks in there!

RAdamson: And where did we find it?

J3327i: In my purse!

RAdamson: And what was my reward for finding it?

J3327i: Our first (and last) BJ!

RAdamson: Jesus, hon. What's happened, and who is the person here who's wearing your body and where are you and when will you be home?

J3327i: It's a long story, and I have to run. They stole my body, that isn't me!

RAdamson: I kinda figured.

J3327i: They're making me dress, act, and speak differently and it's changing my brain too. I need you to come find me

RAdamson: Are you still in the Maldives?

J3327i: No, I'm in Hungary

RAdamson: How am I supposed to find you? What city?

J3327i: A place called Érd. But they're going to be moving us.

RAdamson: When will they give you your body back?

J3327i: They won't :(

RAdamson: What do you mean they won't? I'll go in there and...

J3327i: OMG, NO. You can't tell anyone about this. The minute they think someone knows they'll put me somewhere awful.

RAdamson: I'll catch the next flight to Érd. How will I find you?

J3327i: They make me clean houses. Different house each day. That's why I text you now, this is a lady's computer.

RAdamson: Okay, I'll be there as soon as I can. Can you get me an address?

She typed in the address and I put it into my phone.

J3327i: Hurry, I think they'll be putting me in another body soon and I don't know where or who I'll be

RAdamson: Okay, I'll get on a plane tomorrow, but it will take a couple of days to get there. Have they hurt you?

J3327i: Have to go. Hurry!

And with that, the little bloop sounded and the chat app said. J3327i had left the conversation.

I stood up.

My mind was reeling from what I had just discovered. It really seemed to be her.

I wanted to confront "Karyn," but I knew it had to be the truth. Somehow, some way, someone had stolen my wife's body.

And I was going to find her and get it back.

CHAPTER FOUR

Three-thousand dollars and Six thousand miles, and I'm standing in the rain on a road outside a two-story walk-up in downtown Érd. I didn't really know who I was looking for, but this was the address "Karyn" had given me. I had rented a little car, and it had taken awhile to get used to driving on the wrong side of the road...I'd almost crashed several times.

I walked up to the front door, but before I could knock it opened. An older woman wearing a housekeeper's outfit said something to me in Hungarian or something.

"Umm, I'm looking for...uh. Karyn Adamson?"

She frowned at me, then pulled me in the door. She said something in a guttural-sounding language, and let me up the stairs. She put me in a room, then walked out and yelled for someone.

She got into an argument then with someone outside the door. A few moments later another woman entered, older, in her fifties easily, maybe sixties.

She saw me, and her eyes widened. She ran to me, throwing her arms around me and hugging me tightly.

"I never thought to see you again!" she said, crying softly.

"Karyn?" I pulled back a bit. I mean, I knew she'd be in a different body, but I didn't realize how *different* it might be.

"Yes, it me." She pulled back, looking down at the floor. "I ugly, now, and old."

She had a heavy accent too. German, or Russian.

"Come, I have smoke break now. We talk."

She led me out to the veranda where she pulled out a pack of cigarettes, placed one between her lips, and lit it.

"So you smoke now?"

She nodded, shrugging. "The body. The more I in it, the less Karyn I be."

"That's not good."

"They move me soon. I be here to end of swap. Two week."

"You have to swap every two weeks?"

"Not know."

I felt myself start to tremble. "Karyn, how did this happen?"

She inhaled from her cigarette and shook her head. "I got to Maldive, remember?"

"Yes."

"First night. Big Party. Booze, smoke, drugs. They give to all of us. When we woke up, we in different body. Kept us in house. Fed us, then brought us here. Clean houses."

"Wow, I can't imagine Karyn...well, you ever having to do manual labor like that."

She snorted. "It suck big one."

"I can imagine."

She smoked, her eyes narrowing. It was hard to believe Karyn was in there, my adorable gorgeous wife! Reduced to this older, saggy, gray-haired German house cleaner.

She nodded. "Clean house. Clean Clean Clean. Every day. No day off. No break."

She finished her cigarette and stubbed it out.

"Well, I can take you now. We can go home."

She shook her head, hissing. "No! I have no papers. No passport. I nobody."

"We can get you all that."

"You must leave. They catch you they do this to you too."

"So what do I do?"

"Get hotel. Come tomorrow. Lunch."

"Okay. You'll be here?"

"I sink so," she said. "If I not here, or not here," she pointed to her head. "Find Lord Mallory."

"Is that a person?"

"Lord Mallory Inc." Business, not person.

"Okay."

Someone yelled for her inside the room. She looked at me, panicked. "You go!"

"I will."

She hugged me, fiercely. "Don't forget me!"

"I won't baby. Don't forget me either."

"Hard to think. Love you!" She kissed me hard, and I tasted cigarettes and alcohol on her breath. I wondered where they were keeping them. I

decided I'd get a hotel, but come back and see if I could learn anything else.

I'd also look into Lord Mallory Inc.

Two hours later I was back. I had checked into a small hotel downtown and had put most of my money and clothes in the room.

I sat in my car in the pouring rain and tried to google Lord Mallory. I didn't have much luck other than a website that gave hardly any info other than a 800 number, and a contact form.

No one came in or out of the walk-up until almost dark when a group of house cleaners left. They talked and smoked, carrying vacuum cleaners, laundry bags, and other cleaning items in plastic bins.

They piled into two white vans that had seen better days, then drove off. I followed as best as I could.

As I drove, I could feel myself trembling. My world had changed. I had been happily married, treasured my wife, our life, and it had all been taken away.

They pulled up to a warehouse and again piled out of the van. I watched as Karyn pulled out a vacuum cleaner from the back and took it inside the warehouse. Then she got into a beat-up Honda civic and drove away.

I followed.

She made it to a small apartment building. Only four units. She parked in front of one of the units, then got out. She walked up to the door, opened it, and went inside.

I figured now was my chance.

I walked up to the door and knocked on it. She opened it, and her eyes went wide.

"I followed you."

She nodded, pulling me into the apartment, and hugging me tightly again.
"I hope you do that. Dangerous to be here."

"Why?"

She released me. "They check on me soon."

She led me to a couch. "You hunger?"

I nodded. "Yeah, I could eat."

"I fix stew. You sit."

She went into the tiny kitchen and banged some pots and pans around. In about 15 minutes she'd heated up a beef stew that tasted pretty amazing.

"Wow, you certainly couldn't cook like that when you were Karyn."

"Susan now. She cook."

"Your name is Susan?"

She nodded. "Susan Vanchynek."

"So how do we get you out of this so you can go home with me?"

She looked at me very very sad eyes. "I not know."

"Maybe I should be there when they come?"

"They kill you. Or worse."

"Worse?"

She glanced down at herself. "Worse."

After we ate, she sat and smoked. I watched her, as she sat watching tv. She had lines on her lips from decades of the habit, and her hands and fingers were gnarled and red.

"Your hands look painful," I said.

She nodded. "Arthritis."

"I'm sorry."

She shrugged her rounded shoulders. "Not here much longer."

"Do they give you options? Can you choose who you go into?"

She shook her head. "They come. Take me to place. I sit in sand. When wake up, I someone else."

I nodded. "And you can't leave?"

She snorted. "I can leave anytime. But who want live like this?" she indicated her heavy body. "Old, fat, pain. Can't stop smoking. Can't walk good. No ID, no paperwork. Who I be?"

"When they come for you, how will I find you again?"

"I text you. Check email. Chat messages. I send instructions."

"You can't live like this forever."

She glared at me. "What I do, Bobby? Longer I here, more I Susan. Even now, words hard. No speak good. Two days, three, no more English. Then what?"

"Well, I could teach you. We'll get you papers, bring you home."

"Like this?" She swept her hands over her rotund body. "Ugly, fat. Old!"

I nodded. "Better than nothing. What if the next one is worse?"

"Eventually, we get better."

"What if I brought your body here? We put the helmet on, switch you back?"

She shook her head. "Impossible. Big group. Many guns. They shoot you. Bang bang bang. Goodbye, Robbie."

"Maybe we could go to the embassy, tell them..."

"Tell what? They think I crazy old woman. They think you crazy man to believe me."

I sighed. "So what do we do?"

She shrugged. "We wait. I text you. You come. Eventually, they make mistake. I hope."

"What if they don't?"

She looked at me. "Then you go back to Karyn. Love her. Fuck her. Have family."

"No!" I said, jumping up and going to her. I put my arms around her, holding her close and tight. "You are the person I love, not...whoever that is."

"She be me. Is me. Well, like me. My face. My hair. My clothes—"

Someone banged on the door, forcefully. Her eyes went wide. "You must hide!"

I ran and put myself into the pantry closet. She opened the door, speaking in Hungarian. Two voices, men's voices. I could hear her go to the bedroom, then a few minutes later she came out again.

There were more words exchanged, then they left.

"Are they gone?"

"For now," she said, her eyes leaked tears.

"You okay?"

She nodded and I held her.

"I'll never let you go," I said softly.

She looked up at me, sadness filled her eyes. I kissed her and she smiled.

"There's that smile I love so much."

"Goofball, you."

"Your goofball."

"You can't stay here, Robbie. They check on us during night. Must leave."

"I know, but I'm staying in a hotel close by, okay?"

She nodded and took out another cigarette.

"Those will kill you."

"What I care? Not my body."

I chuckled at that. "We'll get you out of this, somehow."

She nodded, tapping ash into a saucer.

We sat and snuggled a bit more in front of the tv. Then she got tired, and I said goodbye.

As I lay down in the hotel bed, I stared up at the ceiling. There had to be a way. Had to. I wasn't going to let my wife become this decrepit person. She had so much life in her, more life in her little finger than most people had in their whole body.

I sighed, turning over, and went to sleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

Over the next month, I stayed in Érd and ate Hungarian food, walked Hungarian streets, and watched my wife slowly turn into a Hungarian housekeeper. The city was lovely with red-tiled roofs, old stone buildings set amid newer architecture, and lush green lawns, parks, and outdoor areas.

I rented a little yellow car so I could follow the people who had stolen my wife's body. They apparently had nine different locations around Érd and visited them each night. They were harsh with transgressions, hauling old men and women out of houses by the hair sometimes, and throwing them into the back of the white vans they drove. Then they took them to a warehouse in the older section of town where they were unloaded. I never saw what happened to the people, they disappeared into the warehouse and never came back out.

They were violent, and all had evil-looking sidearms. Burly men and women who appeared from all races and backgrounds. They wore black synthetic jumpsuits and knit caps on their heads.

Even the women looked like they could bench-press me.

The Warehouse had no outside signs or indicators and was set behind a fence topped with razor wire and monitored by human, electronic, and canine guardians. I bought a digital camera and used the zoom to get a close-up of the logo on the jumpsuit of one of the guards. After googling for a bit, I found the infinity sign enclosed by a triangle to represent Transmigration studios, a DBA under aha! Lord Mallory Inc. I remembered Karyn telling me to look for Lord Mallory.

It was a tough schedule with the late nights of watching the agents and early mornings so I could keep track of Karyn. The only moments we saw each other were after work for an hour or so before they came to check on her.

"Why you no eat goulash, it put hair on the chest!" she said, wolfing down the chunks of meat in spicy red sauce. Karyn hated spicy food, but apparently, Susan loved goulash.

"Ah, a little spicy for me."

"Baby, you." She sniffed and lit a cigarette. After work she constantly smoked now. "You make luck in progress?"

I sighed, after almost a month, I hadn't made much progress. Lord Mallory Inc and Transmigration Studios had a sparse digital footprint.

"Not much," I said taking a small bite.

"I tell you, go home and fuck Karyn. It okay. I be Susan now anyway."

"No, I refuse to do that!"

She chuckled at my outburst. "You want old sloppy pussy, eh? Fuck me instead?"

I didn't like the person she was becoming. It was rare that the old Karyn showed through. 'Susan's' sense of humor leaned more toward bawdy and

the obscene, something Karyn would never repeat in polite company.

She looked at me. "I sorry. Forget sometime."

"I know," I said.

"You still goofball?"

"Of course."

"Come give hug. Time you go anyway."

I gave her a hug. It felt like hugging my much older aunt, and not my gorgeous wife. I bit back tears as I released her and saw her darting away tears of her own.

"What we do?"

I shrugged. "You said you'd be here a month. I figure we wait and see what reveals itself. Maybe we get a clue and I can use it to get you back."

She nodded, tapping ash from her cigarette into a saucer. "Or maybe you get caught, trying."

I shook my head. "I'm being careful."

"I know."

The next day, she disappeared again.

I waited for six more days in Erd, eating at the little café down below, and basically watching my laptop like a hawk. Eventually, the money ran out, and I had to catch a flight back home.

Surprisingly, 'Karyn' met me at the airport when I landed.

"Robbie!" she said, running up to me as I entered the baggage claim area. "I missed you so much!"

She gave me a hug and a kiss. "How was your trip?"

"Uh..." I said, looking at her. She looked very 'Karyn' with the hair, makeup, clothes and everything else picture perfect.

"Oh! I need to catch this for our feed." She turned around and took a pic of the two of us, making a peace sign with her fingers and pushing her lips out slightly into a perfect imitation of a Karyn Adamson pose.

I gave a grin for the camera, then looked at the arriving baggage board.

"I missed you so so much, baby!" she cried, leaning up to give me a kiss. I touched her lips, and she drew away. "Not too much, or you'll ruin my lippy!"

I sighed and rolled my eyes. Very typical Karyn.

Except I knew it wasn't her.

"So why did you have to go on a business trip again, baby?"

I shrugged. "You know, business."

She nodded, hoping I'd give her more, but when none was forthcoming, she took another series of selfied around baggage claim.

My suitcases finally spewed out, and I hauled them off the bin. Following Karyn, we made it out to the car.

Driving home, we listened to Karyn's playlist, and she did a video shoot using the dash cam, talking about how hot it was in Los Angeles and three makeup tips to heatproof your face.

It was eerie how much she'd become Karyn. My Karyn. Same smell, same attitude, basically her bright spirit that shone a little more than anyone around. If I wasn't careful, I could easily fall for her, again.

But I knew my true wife was somewhere else, someone else and I just had to wait for a message.

We fell into old routines. I had a hard time being with her for any length of time, and could NOT allow myself to make love. She was just as passionate, just as sensual as the real Karyn but I knew it wasn't her and that killed any ardor I might have had.

She grew 'offended' and moved back to her parents. It didn't matter to me; the real Karyn was out there, somewhere. I just had to be patient.

It took three weeks for the message to come again. This time from someone in the Philippines.

J3327i hi

RAdamson: OMG, where are you?

J3327i: Philippines

RAdamson: Can you be more specific?

J3327i: 936 A. Bonifacio Avenue, Balintawak, Quezon City

RAdamson: Do you know how long you will be there?

J3327i: No

RAdamson: Are you okay?

J3327i: yes. Come

RAdamson: I'll catch a flight tomorrow. How will I find you?

J3327i: Go to address. I meet you.

RAdamson: Okay, be safe. I love you

J3327i: Love

And then the connection dropped.

I sighed, gathering staring at myself in the mirror.

This had to stop.

CHAPTER SIX

The next day I took out a payroll advance loan and bought a plane ticket. My bags were still packed from the last trip, so I grabbed both suitcases and caught the flight.

Twenty hours later, I stepped out into a rainy afternoon in Manila and caught a cab to Quezon City. Traffic was fairly heavy with tiny scooters, motorbikes, and small cars zipping through the streets. The cab driver barely spoke English, and apparently used the horn as a secondary driving aid.

He dropped me in front of the address. A rather tall building made of steel and windows, looking very modern stretched upward dozens of floors.

I stood, shielding my eyes, staring up at the skyscraper, and glancing down at the address. Etched into the stone facade of the building was 936. I was apparently at the right place. I wondered how I would know Karyn since she could be anyone.

I stepped up to the building and opened the door. Grey marble floors stretched in front of me, and I started walking up to an immense reception area.

Before I could approach a desk, a figure darted out from an alcove and caught me by the arm. Without speaking she guided me to a waiting elevator, and we stepped inside. She pressed the 24th floor, and we began to ascend.

"Karyn?" I said, looking at her.

She nodded her head, eyes cast up toward the ceiling.

She was short, less the five-foot, and had to be mid-fifties or sixties, wearing a stylish grey business suit. She had dark hair that had been coiffed into a helmet-like flip and I could smell hairspray, perfume, and cigarettes. She was pudgy, and her neck had quite a wattle, with deep wrinkles around her dark brown eyes.

The door dinged, and we stepped off the elevator. She took me into a suite, and past another reception desk, saying something quickly to the secretary as we passed. She nodded and made a note on her notepad.

She opened the door to an office, and we stepped inside.

Immediately, she turned to me, wrapping her arms around my neck. "Missed you!"

"I missed you too."

She clung to me, holding on for a long while, her face pressed into my neck. Eventually, she released me, wiping tears carefully from her eyes.

"I take it you are Karyn."

"Yes. Karyn. Apology English not good. Brain bad."

"That's okay, darling. Have they said how long you will be..."

"Imelda Florez," she said.

"Imelda?" I said. "How long will you have to be Imelda?"

She shrugged. "Long time."

I held her, smoothing her hair. It had quite a bit of hairspray.

"Is there any way we can get you back to your body?"

She shrugged and pulled away from me, lighting a cigarette. "You could talk to Ex. Maybe he let you buy me."

"People can't be bought or sold."

"They stole my body. They tell me work work work, or I stuck forever. So I work work work, then they put me somewhere else, not so bad. The more 'Melda work, the better body she get."

"Who is this 'Ex?'"

She sighed. "Head of company. He work in main office. He take Karyn body, put someone into it and me into Susan, now 'Melda."

Her voice was high-pitched and scratchy. I didn't like it. She spoke fast with a heavy, what I assumed was Philippine accent.

"And you don't know how long you'll be here?"

She shook her head. "Secretary, assistant to Vice President. 'Melda make coffee, type notes, help boss send email. Stuck here long time, more than four month probably."

"That's unacceptable."

"Robbie should forget Karyn, that 'Melda was Karyn. Go home to your Karyn. I be 'Melda for awhile, then someone else, someone else. Ten year, twenty year, who know how long before back to Karyn body, then I not really Karyn anymore, I SusanMelda, blahblahblah. Robbie get tired of following 'Melda, find other women...so you go. Live life, enjoy, be happy."

"But I can't be happy, knowing you're stuck here, like this."

She shrugged. "Not so bad. 'Melda only 60. Susan early 70s. Lose ten years each hop if I behave."

I sighed. I couldn't be in Manila for the next four months. Hell, I didn't have enough money to last the next four days and my absence from the Insurance company had already been noted and I was barely hanging on as it was.

"How do I find this Ex?"

"Exmurtio, his name. Head of TS. Work in Brisbane."

"Australia?"

She nodded, stubbing out her cigarette.

"I wish you wouldn't smoke."

"You not 'Melda husband, 'Melda have a husband, Jake. He smoke too."

"Wait, you're *married*?"

She nodded.

"So you expect me to just, what, leave you here? Fuck some other man as his wife?"

"I not tell you to come here. You come here on own."

"Yeah, because we're married, don't forget!"

She looked up at me with tears brimming in her eyes. "I not forget. You 'Melda's goofball."

I nodded, hugging her tightly. "I'll figure it out. I'll go talk to this person, and get your body back. Somehow."

"How?" she said, pulling away.

"I don't know. I'll talk to him."

"What you say to get body back? You need plan, Robbie, not just go there and ask. He say, 'Why should I do that?'"

I nodded.

"That stupid plan, if what you do. They send you packing, then stick 'Melda into ninety year old body!"

"Okay, I get it."

"Need 'nother plan, Robbie. You fuck up, 'Melda pay price. Get it?"

"Yes, I get it."

"So don't fuck up, or don't try it. Being 'Melda not so bad, at least I can walk, talk, work. Some girl get bad bad body. In hospital. Dying. Some get old man body. You want 'Melda be old man?"

"No, definitely not."

"Then have better plan then 'Please please give me back wife body!'"

She said this last bit in a mocking tone I really didn't like. It grated against my nerves.

"I get it!" I said, with more force than intended.

"See?" she snorted. "You already lose. Fuck off home, Robbie."

"No, I'll figure it out. I'm sorry."

She sneered at me, pointing with her chubby brown finger with the cigarette between index and middle. "You get plan. Tell 'Melda plan before you meet Ex. You get?"

"I get."

"'Melda have to work now. Robbie come back tomorrow?"

I shook my head and gritted my teeth. I didn't especially like this new Karyn, but what choice did I have?

"Of course."

She patted me on the cheek. "Good boy. I see you tomorrow, then."

She escorted me out, giving me a chaste kiss on the cheek. Then she stalked away, her low heels clicking on the marble floor.

I stepped out into the rain. It was warm in the Philippines, and the rain sluiced down my shirt soaking it. I hailed a cab, and went to the hotel I'd booked in advance.

The traffic was crazy. Drivers and motorbikes zipped through the wet streets, each hellbent on their own destruction.

The single-level motel wasn't anything special and I found my way to my room. It had a bed with a sagging mattress, an old metal desk that had seen better days, and a barely functional restroom with a shower that dripped constantly.

I checked the bed for bedbugs, then unpacked. I did it by rote, my jaw clenched, furious at the exchange with Karyn.

Who's to say that was really Karyn anyway? Wasn't it just Imelda Florez's brain thinking it was Karyn Adamson? And my wife's body just thought she was someone else but was adjusting back to being herself? Was there a soul transfer, or was it just the body teased into thinking it was someone else, and slowly adjusting back?

I liked that thought...except...except...

I sighed. No matter how 'Karyn-like' the current Karyn was, I could still tell it wasn't her. It was in her sense of humor, the way she smiled, the way her eyes darted back and forth across a room when entering. Whoever was in there now constantly gauged situations, measured people by some internal standard, and had almost zero sense of humor, at least the way my Karyn did.

And Imelda...

As twisted as the personality appeared, Imelda still called me her goofball. She looked up at me with Imelda's eyes, but I could see Karyn shining through. I couldn't describe it, somehow I just knew in my heart,

she was Karyn. Not Imelda thinking she was Karyn. It would be easier to think of it like that, but then I truly would have lost my wife.

I slammed my hand down on the metal desk, instantly regretting it.

I needed a plan, she was right.

If I bungled it somehow, Karyn would pay. I shuddered to think of her stuck in an octogenarian body, suffering from cancer, or some other malady.

Hell, I was a salesman. If I could sell ice insurance to Eskimos, I could sell this Exmuritious on returning Karyn's body.

As I considered this, I paced back and forth. It was late in the day and night fell outside.

I thought about sales. I'd been through so many sales academy lessons, but it always boiled down to the same ten things....

Make it about them, not about me.

Research research research

Build Rapport

Define the buyer

Contribute first, sell second

Ask questions and listen

Be careful of psychological quirks

Approach them on their level

Sell on emotion

And never forget that I'm selling to a person.

At least I had a name, a target. Exmuritious Forrester. I could scour the internet and find out as much as I needed. My goal was simple: to sell Exmuritious that it was in his best interest to return Karyn to her body.

I yanked my laptop out of the bag and started putting together a portfolio.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Exmuritious Forrester was in his late 50s. Married, two grown kids, from Johannesburg South Africa but now lived in Sydney, Australia. He was a former scientist turned entrepreneur and founding partner of Lord Mallory Inc dba Transmigration Studios. He had three partners from various parts of the world and Lord Mallory had a slew of patents pending in the areas of 'The Neuroplasticity Enhancement Engine.'

I sighed, reading the general info pages of the company, Forrester's LinkedIn and other social media profiles. The profiles of his partners...none of it inspired me to any ideas.

Exmuritious had been involved in a nasty divorce and his children apparently didn't like him. I was able to find his wife and two daughters on social media. They were far less introspective than Exmuritious, though I had trouble with some of the language translations from Google translate.

I went to a convenience store and bought chips, soda, and a pack of 3x5 index cards, some pens, sticky notes, tape, and other supplies I'd need to

build this plan. I researched until around 3 am, then went to sleep for a few hours.

Karyn met me at a little cafe in the morning. She smoked, drank coffee, and ordered eggs sunny side up with fried rice and tocino -a special type of bacon.

"So, Kano, how you hotel?" she asked me after giving her order.

I shrugged. "It's fine, and why do you call me Kano? I'm Robbie."

"Yes, yes, Kano mean American in Tagalog. My brain think in tagalog more each day, Robbie."

"But you're still 'you' right? Still Karyn?"

She shrugged her shoulders and touched her hair. "Me in 'Melda, wear 'Melda clothes, do 'Melda's work, live 'Melda's home. Hard to think Karyn, when everyt'ing 'Melda. Easier to be 'Melda."

I sighed. "You can't forget who you are though, Karyn! Remember who you really are."

"I do, Robbie, but get hard." She said, tapping ashes into the ashtray. "Like a book I read once, Karyn."

"I'm putting a plan together to get to Exmuritious..."

She waited as the waitress put down our food.

"And?" she said, after taking a forkful and beginning to eat.

"And...I need to go back home and interrogate Karyn."

She pointed her fork at me. "Good! You fuck her, too, Robbie."

"Don't be crass."

"Why not? She your wife now, not 'Melda."

"I refuse to let you go on like this," I said. "I'm going to get you out of there and back home where you belong."

She shrugged. "What if I don't want to?"

"What are you saying?"

She ate some more, looking down at the table. "Easy to be 'Melda. Just give in. Ron wanted fuckie last night, and I said I had headache, but not easy."

A sick, greasy feeling slid into my gut at that.

"Even if I go back to Karyn, what happen? I think in tagalog, wear Filipino dress, speak in Filipino language, eat Filipino food. How I do that as Karyn?"

"We'll get it figured out, just give me a chance to get this fixed."

She nodded. "They keep me here long time, they said. 6 month maybe. I not going nowhere."

I wondered at that and wondered what she'd be like when I returned. Would she even recognize me?

She ate, scooping food into her mouth, then darting a glance at her watch. "Time to go, Robbie. You go back today?"

I shrugged. "No, I'll scope out the players again. They check on you in the evenings still?"

She shook her head. "I have to report to handler on Thursday. They tell 'Melda where."

I nodded. "And if you don't report?"

She shrugged. "Stuck as 'Melda. Not so bad, this body. Many other bad bad."

"You report. I'll be watching."

She nodded. "Alright, Robbie."

She stood up and I helped her into her coat. She turned in my arms, and looked up at me with her new eyes. "You won't forget about me, will you,

Robbie?" And it was perfect Karyn, almost the same voice, same inflection, and I knew she was still in there.

"No, I won't forget."

She wrapped me in her arms, hugging her head to my chest. "It gets so hard sometimes. You have no idea."

"I know baby."

She cried a little, her head against my chest, holding me tight. Then she pulled away.

"You absolutely can not get caught, Robbie. I shouldn't have brought you here, but I missed you terribly!"

"I know, honey. I'll be careful."

"God, I just want to go home. I hate this!"

"I'll get you home, I promise."

She nodded, taking out a cigarette, and then she brushed a tear away.

"Talk later, Kano. 'Melda go work now."

I nodded as I watched the Imelda veneer slide over her features. "Have a good day, Karyn."

She frowned a moment, then nodded. "See you tomorrow?"

"Of course. I'll meet you here."

"Okay! Kano." She cackled, putting a scarf over her head and stepping out into the rain.

I walked in the rain for a while, letting the cold water sluice down over me, sliding the darkness off my soul and down into the gutters of the city. Horns honked, people yelled, bicycles sped by, the gears of everyday life were in motion and Karyn was stuck in the wrong body.

I needed to know more. I needed to know about the process, how they were able to do this, and what exactly they were doing. It couldn't just be memories, there was so much more that made a person a person.

I found my way to the city center, where I sat in a wet bench and let the rain make me wetter as I watched wet people move in the wetness. Karyn hated it when I sulked and felt sorry for myself and she always knew just what to say to cheer me up. Except Karyn wasn't Karyn anymore, she was Imelda and I had to do something about it.

She was counting on me.

The person in Karyn knew. She had participated in the process, knew how to get a new body, and knew the people to talk to. I needed to speak to her, shake the information out of her if necessary, get her to tell me who had done this, and how it had worked.

I thought about Brandon too and wondered if Dalton was having the same feelings. Dalton was dark but smart, so it might be good to talk to him. I also needed Brit, my assistant at work. She was a wiz at organizing things and doing the legwork, and Jeff with his mad IT skills. I wanted to bring Transmigration Studios down.

There had to be more people like me, people who had loved ones who suddenly were different people, and they wanted them back. I just had to find those people, bring them together, and bring down Lord Mallory INC.

Or die trying. I wiped the rain off my brow.

Life just wasn't worth living without Karyn in it.

I sighed, standing up. My pants threatened to sag to the ground, but I pulled them up and slogged away toward the hotel, and toward what I hoped would be a plan to bring down this awful company filled with awful people, doing awful things.

As I rounded the corner to the hotel, the clouds broke up, and sunlight filtered down in rays through the thick jungle canopy surrounding the city. I could smell rotting things floating in the river nearby, felt the water drying on my skin, and shivered a bit in the late autumn air.

Somehow, Some way, I would bring it down. The madness had to stop.

With a renewed vim in my vigor, I entered the hotel and bounded up the stairs. Time to get busy.

CHAPTER EIGHT

I made it home two weeks later. After exhausting all avenues and possibilities in the Phillipines, I knew I had to confront 'Karyn' and 'Brandon' before I could put my plan into action.

'Karyn' had apparently moved back home, and changed the locks. It was close to midnight, but I banged on the door anyway.

I heard giggling and a male voice in the house. I bit my tongue against the anger, this really wasn't Karyn at least not my Karyn, but my Karyn was also sleeping with another man tonight and I was about done with the whole situation.

The man opened the door. "Yeah?"

He was tall, muscled, younger than me, dark of hair and skin. "You need to leave," I said, muscling past him.

"What the fuck, man, you can't just—"

"This is my house, asshole. Get your shit and get gone."

'Karyn' came in wearing a feathered robe and not much else. She'd obviously been to some salon, her hair was a light platinum and she was wearing awful light pink lipstick. It also looked like she'd had extensions put in, and she was wearing false eyelashes. "Robbie! I thought you had left!"

"I'm home, dear!" I said, loudly, dropping my suitcases. "Tell whoever this is to get gone."

The guy looked up at Karyn who nodded. "I'll call you," she said.

"But I—"

"Just go," Karyn said. "I'll deal with this."

The guy grabbed his clothes and left, muttering under his breath.

"Well, I see you've been busy," I said, walking to the refrigerator and pulling out a beer. I needed as much alcohol as I could ingest.

"Well, if you hadn't been such a bastard, Robbie, I'd be making love with you." She came into the kitchen and looked up at me with sorrowful eyes.

"Jesus, what have you done to yourself?" I said. I brushed some of the extended locks off her shoulder.

"You like?" She moved in, pressing her body to me. "I did it for you, baby."

"Did you now?" I spoke in a low tone. "Not for...whoever that was?"

She pouted. "He was only a placeholder until you got home, Robbiekins. There's only one man in my life and that's you." She reached up with her arms to hug me.

Gritting my teeth, I allowed her to embrace me. She wore extended nails and was clopping around in platform heels. After years of being with the real Karyn, this was a cartoon replacement, someone trying to be Karyn who didn't have her taste, color coordination, or understanding.

But I needed information from her, so it would pay to try to be nice.

"Why don't you come to bed? I'll clean up, a little, and we can get to know each other again?"

I sighed, "Yeah, okay."

I walked toward the bathroom, and saw what she meant on the bed. I went into the bathroom and took a shower as I heard her pulling the bedsheets.

I let the scalding water sluice over me as I closed my eyes and leaned against the shower stall. Could I really do this?

I thought about Karyn stuck in Imelda in the Philippines forced to sleep with an older overweight man every night. If she could do it, I could do it in order to get her back.

I'd do anything to get her back.

For this to work, I had to get on the inside of the organization. I had to be seen as a potential customer, maybe many potential customers. And my only link to the inside of the operation was whoever was making the bed out there.

I needed her to get me inside, make the introduction. From there I could find out about the inner workings of the company, and get the leverage I needed against Exmuritious, Transmigration Studios and Lord Mallory Inc.

The door opened, and Karyn entered, sliding up behind me and pressing her body to me tightly. "Mmmm, welcome home, husband."

I turned wrapping my arms around her. Okay, I admit, I was turned on. It had been over a month since I'd made love.

Turning in her arms, I glanced down at her...and my jaw almost hit the floor.

"You like?" she said, staring up at me with her mouth parted.

Below her mouth, and the object of my attention were two enormous breasts. They look over-filled, the skin stretched taught. I could see a bit of a scar around the nipple and some bruising along the bottom.

"What have you done?"

She placed my hands on them, moaning. "They're for you, Robbie. All for you."

"What...why...why would you do this to...yourself?"

She gave a little shrug. "I dunno, I always wanted large breasts.

I nodded, swallowing. What would Karyn think when she got back to her body? She'd be devastated if she knew...I sighed. All the more reason to get 'Karyn' on my side so I could get inside the company.

"You like them, don't you?" she looked up at me with Karyn's eyes and I melted a little, I admit.

"Of course, I do."

She pressed her body to mine, and we kissed under the hot water.

The next morning, I felt sick. 'Karyn' snored on my arm, and a trickle of spit had created a pool of saliva on my shoulder where she slept.

I slid my arm out from under her, and she rolled over.

I got up and made toast with a hole and a sunny-side-up egg in it, which used to be Karyn's favorite breakfast. I made some fresh-squeezed orange juice, and some turkey-bacon then put all of it on a tray with her Macbook. She loved it when I made small romantic gestures like this — or used to when she was 'herself.'

Stepping into the room, I set the tray next to the bedside. "Good morning sunshine!"

I opened the curtains, and she stirred, sitting up. "What's this?"

"Breakfast in bed, of course!" I said, setting the tray in front of her.

She looked up at me. "You didn't have to do this!"

I smiled, giving her a soft kiss. "But I love surprising you, oh and—" I brought out a fresh-cut white rose. "The pièce de résistance!"

She stared at the breakfast, holding the rose. "But—"

"But what?"

I could see tears beading up in her eyes. "Nothing, Robbie. Thank you, darling."

"You're welcome, my love."

Walking back into the kitchen, I made myself some cereal and eggs, then sat at the kitchen counter and ate, reading my email from work and responding to the latest crisis.

She came out sometime later, showered and fresh and wearing pink tights, white boots, and a pink top that said 'PINK' in white lettering across her now impressive bust. She was shooting a video as she walked.

"And this is my loving honey bunny who cooked me breakfast this morning, say hello to my followers darling!"

I waved at the camera, and she gave me a careful smooch. "Smoochies!"

"Now, as you can see, I've had some 'work done' and that's not all! I'm going in for more—"

She walked off into the den where she usually had her broadcasts, and I sighed, shaking my head. Just have to get through it, Robert, you can do this...

I finished with work a few hours later, then cleaned up the dishes and ran some laundry. 'Karyn' was enclosed in her office and I knew she wouldn't come out until post-production on her video was done.

I thought about going into the office, but the minute I did that I knew I'd be swamped with issues that would keep me busy until late. I unpacked the cards I'd made in the Philippines and set them out on the table, re-acquainting myself with the project.

I knew that Lord Mallory INC was hiding money. They had too many facilities around the world and definitely not enough reported income to support it all. So unless one of the founders was independently wealthy, they were either going bankrupt, or they weren't divulging information. They showed a loss quarter after quarter with little retained earnings, or at least that was what I read from their company profile site on some of the financial reporting software I had access to. They had huge increases in their cost of debt and it spelled bankrupt no matter how you looked at it.

Which was good news. If I could find a source of traffic for new investors or help them become current again, they might look favorably on me when I made the ask for Karyn. That, or alerting financial authorities so the company could be taken down...but that could spell doom for my wife getting back if the machine or whatever that switched their bodies was not accessible.

I needed 'Karyn' on my side. So far, she seemed happy. We hadn't talked about the fight that had caused her to go to her 'parents' nor why she mysteriously came back. I suspected Janice recognized her daughter wasn't acting 'herself' and they had a fight. They barely could stand each other even when Karyn was operating her body...much less a stranger. Janice would have seen right though it and thought her daughter was on drugs probably.

She came out of the room and embraced me from behind. "Mmmm, hello lover."

"Hi Darling," I said collecting the notecards.

"What's all this?"

"Oh a new work project. How did your vlog go?"

"Wonderfullllll!" she giggled. "We're all set for the launch next month, I'm so excited!"

"Ah...is that the new makeup line?"

"Yasssss." She snuggled me. "Pre-orders are up and the distributor is adding three more colors!"

"Ohh, very nice."

"Mhmmm," she buried her face in my neck, then licked it.

I couldn't help but shiver.

"Are you hungry? I thought I could get take out."

"Starving, lover."

"Hong Kong Café?"

She rattled a long phrase out in a foreign language. I took it to be Mandarin, but it could have been anything.

"I'm sorry?"

"Oh!" she stood up. "Sorry, darling. Yes, Hong Kong Café and I'd like Xiao Long Bao and yu xiang rou si."

"Ummm," I paused. "We've been going to Hong Kong café for years and those are not on the menu..."

"Oh, well, whatever you think I'll like." She said, with some doubt in her voice.

"Crab Rangoon and Chicken Chop suey?"

She shivered. "Of course."

"Coming right up!"

I made the call and grabbed my keys.

"Mmm," she said after finishing her meal. "That was wonderful."

I smiled at her. "You hated it. I could see you barely containing your gag reflex."

She dropped her smile.

"Look, I know you're not Karyn."

She just stared at me, her face a mask.

"But that's okay. I think it's hot."

She frowned. "You...do?"

I stood up. This was my chance. I couldn't blow this, she had to believe it.

"Yes. I adored Karyn, but now you're her and she's no longer who she was."

"Is that why you left for all those weeks? She...contacted you?"

I nodded.

She exhaled. "You have no idea how hard this has been."

"I can imagine."

"And you're really okay with me in your wife's body?"

"Yes."

She smiled and came to me. "Good, because I really like being with you."

She sat on my lap, and I brushed her long platinum hair off her shoulder, kissing it softly.

She moaned. "This body is sooooo sexy."

"Mmmm, yes. Let me show you how much."

"Okayyyy!" she giggled as I lifted her into my arms, and took her back to the bedroom.

I just hoped somehow, some way, somewhere, Karyn, the real Karyn, would understand.

CHAPTER NINE

The next day, 'Karyn' had an appointment, so I used the opportunity to paw through her items and see if there was anything on Lord Mallory or Transmigration Studios.

Her desk and closet were empty of anything pre-swap. As was her suitcase and carry-on. It was as if all traces of who she'd been were erased.

I went into her study, and logged onto her computer. She always used the same password, which I'd never told her I knew, so I was able to login fairly easily.

Immediately, website with screens in Asian writing popped up. Bingo.

I took screen caps of a few of them, and scrolled through her history. Apparently she had an email account she checked regularly under her old name, but I couldn't understand any of the writing or messages. I was able to get google translate to figure out some of it, and sure enough she had logged into Transmigration Studios website.

She definitely had a logon. There was the standard account and profile information, and also tabs for the new persona with contact lists, pictures of her 'new friends' all with information in Asian that I couldn't understand, but could guess at.

I was able to see her 'pre' swap info also, and took copious notes.

She'd been a woman name Li-Hahn Tram. Born and raised in Singapore, she'd been 82 when she swapped. Apparently, she'd made most of her money as an investment banker and had quite the sum. She'd paid \$187,000 for the swap into Karyn per auction 9485.

I swallowed. That was more than double my yearly income. There was going to be no way I could even match that kind of cost.

Or could I? The house had equity. We had two cars, one that I owned outright. I did the math. With the equity in the house, plus cashing out my retirement I could put that amount together, in fact I could go as high as \$200,000 if needed.

Jesus, was I really thinking about this?

Okay, genius, so you get on the inside, you get to one of the auctions or whatever, and you win an auction. Now you've bought yourself a new body, so what? How does that help Karyn?

I could threaten to expose the operation. Bring in the feds, some government agency.

That would take time, and from my reading they had fail-safes; go to any policing agency and you get yanked out of your body permanently into oblivion. Do not pass go, do not collect \$200.

It was a very neat, tidy operation that had apparently been going on for years. Black market sale and trade of bodies.

I thought about it. If it had been going on for years, there had to be a 'robin hood.' Someone, or a group of someone's who knew about it and were trying to do something about it. I needed to find them.

I needed the dark web.

I put her laptop away, and collected my own, dashing out the door.

As I drove through the streets, I thought about it.

Ex-Muritious and the gang of Transmigration studios had apparently put a modern front on an ages-old machine. Generations ago, people would literally attend auctions in the dark of night wearing masks and shrouded in capes as some young nubile form was brought onto a stage. The person would be turned, and an examiner would perform a demonstration of teeth, strength, suppleness, muscle tone and more.

The bidding would commence with the forms holding up numbers quietly to the sound of a chime that intoned the different bidding levels. There wasn't an auctioneer just a series of tones to indicate amounts and everyone knew which tone was assigned each denomination. They would hold up a placard at the desired levels until only one placard remained.

Apparently, the auction itself hadn't changed since the very first one that pre-dated Christianity. How could I, just one lonely man, bring down such an ancient rite?

Then I chuckled. One thing I knew was insurance. Every auction house, both online and in-person had a company that insured against fraud, liability, bad transactions, and the like. If this very successful auction had been running since before Christ, there had to be an insuring agency behind it. A group, well funded, that maintained the business of the auction, ensured proper payment, and reimbursed individuals in the event of a bad

transaction. There had to be bad transactions in all that amount of time. If I could find this dark agency, perhaps I could work at it from the backside.

I grinned, hopeful for the first time since this had happened.

Li-Hahn came home a few hours later.

"Hi Baby!" she said, after walking in the door. I gasped.

She'd had...something...done to her mouth. She had the trout lips favored by so many movie and tv stars, an obscene change that made me wince.

"What do you think?" She fluttered her nailed hands at her mouth. "Are they more kissable?"

Swallowing, I leaned in and kissed her softly. "Do they hurt?"

"Mhmm, a bit. And some of the swelling will go down, so you can put away that frown, Mr. Frowny Face!"

I nodded. I really needed to get Karyn back in her body pronto before this bitch did something to her body that could not be undone.

She fluttered around the house, dropping articles of clothing, bags, her purse, and other items. Shortly, I heard her talking in the studio, loud exclamations about how amazing her new lips were and how everyone should 'stay tuned!' for the new Karyn.

I sighed, sitting on the couch and waiting for her to finish. I made us a little dinner - chicken, and rice, and set out two plates, along with a nice wine, and lit the candle.

"Oooh! Someone is giving some effort!" She said, fluttering into the room.

"Ah, yes. I treat my baby right."

She leaned in for a chaste kiss, then winced. "Sorry, they're pretty sore."

"It's okay, honey. Try to eat something."

She daintily skewered some chicken and placed it in her mouth, chewing carefully with those lips slightly open.

I closed my eyes in disgust, trying not to allow the display unsettle me.

"So I wanted to talk to you about something," I said.

"Oh?"

I nodded. "What kind of referral fee do you get with Transmigration Studios if you bring in a new client?"

The act dropped, and she put down her fork. She held up a taloned finger, then sipped some wine, fluttering her eyes closed.

"You want to soul-exchange."

I shrugged. "Why not? You seem to have traded up."

"But why, Robbie? You're a handsome man!"

I appeared to be thinking. "I was bullied a lot in grade-school. When I got into high school, I played in the marching band and was never the popular kid. I envied the quarter-back, the basket-ball players and all the girls they scored."

"Awww, poor widdle Wobbie!"

"Anyway, I've always wanted a more attractive body. Chiseled, cut, the kind girls go for."

She nodded, excitedly.

"So since you are so beautiful, I thought maybe I'd trade up too. Get someone who looks like they deserve to be with you."

She squealed. "Yes!" She got up out of her chair, then clopped over to me, sitting down in my lap and throwing her arms around me shoulders.

"Baby, what if you become a handsome black man?"

"Sure," I lied. "Whatever you would find attractive."

She nodded. "Well, I do get quite a finders' fee, but you would have to be certain..."

"Oh, I'm certain."

"Then I'll make the arrangements! Oh, darling, this makes me so excited, you have no idea!" She threw her arms around me, her platinum locks sliding into my face.

Wincing, I nodded.

"Take me into the bedroom, lover." She said in a husky voice.

I lifted her in my arms, and walked down the hall.

CHAPTER TEN

Rain pelted the windshield as we drove through the night.

Our uber driver expertly navigated the streets of Rome as we sped through the Italian city. Li-Hahn gasped at all the sites, the cathedrals, the columns, and giggled as we sped over cobblestones as the tiny car vibrated.

I closed my eyes. The flight had been long, and I had been airsick. The speed, swaying, and now rumbling were causing my stomach to do a slow roll, and I hoped I could make it to the hotel.

"Isn't it gorgeous, baby?" Li-Hahn said, sliding over next to me. She wore a faux fur coat, golden bangles adorned her wrists, and she wore a skin-tight yellow jumpsuit that accentuated her curves. She'd visited a spray-tan place before we left and her skin color was a deep tan. She wore several different kinds of perfume, and the mixture of spray-tan, perfume, lotion, and whatever else she wore gave me a headache.

"We here!" the uber driver said, pulling into the entry of the hotel.

"Grazie," I said, and unfolded myself out of the car. I opened an umbrella and held it for Li-Hahn who shrieked a bit from the downpour before scurrying underneath it.

Yes, I could have made it so she didn't get wet.

No, I didn't especially want to.

A valet professionally loaded all of our luggage onto a cart and followed us through the immense glass doors and into the foyer of the hotel.

"Oh, my Gawd, isn't this gorgeous baby?" Li-Hahn said. She'd adopted a rather squeaky version of my wife's normally musical soprano voice that grated my nerves constantly.

"Yeah, it's great." I walked toward the front counter.

"Welcome to the Presidio Hotel, Signore and Signora!" A young man said from behind the counter. "Do you have a reservation?"

"Robert Adamson," I said. "And...wife." I shivered as Li-Hahn jiggled beside me.

"Ah, yes, Il Signore la Signora Adamson." He tapped away at his keyboard. "I see you stay una settimana?"

"One week," yes. I said, pulling out my ID and credit card.

The hotel was costing me a fortune, more than an entire month's mortgage payment.

I sighed.

We'd sold the house.

Luckily, it was a sellers' market right now, and I'd been able to sell for quite a bit more than market value. We'd also sold the car, cashed in my retirement, and sold the SUV.

All-told I had just under \$300k that I'd moved into a special account. Li-Hahn said they only connected to banks from specific offshore locations,

and helped me set up the correct funding accounts.

Karyn texted three weeks ago saying they were about to move her again. I hadn't heard from her since, and the whole situation left a greasy feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Meanwhile, Li-Hahn was slicing, dicing, enhancing, fluffing, painting, injecting, or otherwise modifying my sweet wife's body. I hated it, hated what happened, what continued to happen, and wanted to find whoever was behind this mess and get them to clean it up.

I glanced over at my bronzed, platinum, trout-lipped 'wife' and sighed again. Hopefully, everything she'd done could be undone.

We found our way to the seventh floor and Li-Hahn squealed as she clopped her way into the suite. "Gawd, this is living baby. Living!"

She flittered around the place, unpacking and stowing all her clothes, makeup items, lingerie, and other items, then popped out her phone to give an 'update from Rome!' to all of her fans.

I opened my computer and logged into the chat app Karyn used to contact me. Still no messages. I sighed and flipped it closed. I grabbed the remote and turned on the tv.

A little while later, Li-Hahn finished her video and went into the bathroom. I could hear the shower running. She sang soft songs in Mandarin. Now that she knew I knew who she had been, some of her old personality had returned. I refused to call her Karyn in private, much to her distress, but she seemed happy with her 'new life' and had settled into it.

I gritted my teeth, thinking about Karyn and where she might be. She could be anywhere, anyone, and the old anger seethed in my gut.

Li-Hahn finished her shower, and I heard the blow dryer humming. I knew she'd want to 'make love' but I didn't know if I had it in me. I

considered playing 'asleep' but knowing her she'd just wake me up in some way with her mouth and those lips...ugh.

You still need her on your side, Robbie boy, I thought. I needed to keep her happy and feeling like we were just two crazy kids on a trip of a lifetime to get me a new body.

"Ta-daa!" She came out in a grand entrance, perfumed, curled, and wearing an almost there nightie that barely covered her naughty bits.

"Hey gorgeous," I smiled.

"You like?" her voice had that high-pitched quality that was starting to grate on my nerves.

"Mmmm, oh yeah. I like."

She minced toward me, wiggling her enhanced ass and jiggling her enhanced breasts. "And what would you like to do to me?"

I sighed. "Come on over and see, hot stuff."

She climbed into bed with me and snuggled, kissing me softly on the mouth.

She slipped my shirt over my head and began kissing my chest, her mouth soft and moist against my skin. Cupping my package, she began to stroke me and I moaned softly.

The real Karyn enjoyed things on the gentle side. Long, slow lovemaking sessions where we each received and gave equally to the experience. They were a joy to partake, and our sessions could last for several hours.

Li-Hahn, however, enjoyed fierce fast fuckfests.

I gathered her platinum locks in my hand and pulled them back hard, kissing her mouth then biting the base of her neck as I pinned her to the bed.

Tearing off her lingerie, I proceeded to hold her hair in my hand tightly, twisting.

"What do you want me to do to you, bitch?" I said, in an urgent voice in her ear.

"Ohhh, fuck me!"

"Do you deserve a good fucking?" I slid my fingers down to her center and slipped a finger inside. "Are you wet yet?"

"Ohh yes!" she moaned. "Bite my nipples."

I leaned down to her breasts and took one of them in my teeth. Using my tongue and upper teeth, I bit down hard on her nipple as she squealed and writhed under me.

Moving to the other nipple, I repeated the exercise, biting down while twisting the other with my thumb and forefinger.

She panted, gasping.

I bit down into her neck as I twisted both nipples, then again sank my fingers into her hair, and spread her thighs with my knee.

"I'm going to fuck you now."

She nodded, gasping. "Yes, oh God, yes!"

Sinking my shaft into her wet pussy, I groaned and thrust into her several times.

Pinning her to the bed, I hammered into her, thrusting as hard and deep as I could.

Luckily, it was over fast. I always felt dirty after fucking Li-Hahn in my wife's body, so I extricated myself and went and showered.

Hanging my head, I let the scorching water sluice away my guilt and shame. I know Karyn had to have sex with whomever she was with, but I

still felt like I was betraying her every time I had sex. It felt like a form of necrophilia, making love to her body and not her mind.

After the shower, I slid back into bed wearing my sweats and a t-shirt.

"Mmm, that was sooo good."

"Yeah," I said. I wasn't very tired. We were on Italian time and while it was nearly midnight in Rome it was only 5 pm for me.

"So, tomorrow," I said. "What is the plan?"

"The event is at 8 pm. You have to be accepted in order to go to the next level."

"And what happens at the event?"

She smiled. "I can't tell you that, darling, you'll have to see for yourself."

"Can you give me a clue?" I tickled her side gently, kissing her neck.

"It's a secret!" She squealed. "If I tell you, I'll ruin the surprise!"

"Surely you can give me a hint?"

She shook her head, still giggling.

"Not even a little one?"

She smiled, her eyes dancing a bit in the dim light. "It's a test."

"What kind of test?"

She shrugged. "To see if you're being honest or not."

I felt butterflies stir in the greasy pit of my stomach. "Honest about what?"

She shrugged. "Your intentions for the Auction. They try to weed out anyone who is there to undermine or otherwise derail the operation. You have nothing to worry about, baby."

I nodded.

"Do you?" She giggled, sliding into my arms again and yawning.

"No, of course not."

She nodded, laying her head down on my shoulder. She began snoring shortly after, drool leaking down to wet my t-shirt.

I shifted her over onto the bed, and she rolled over, taking most of the covers with her.

Sighing, I stared up at the ceiling and pondered my fate. I had to pass whatever test this might be, and I was sure this wouldn't be the first one. In fact, if I were them, I'd have been looking out for us the moment we got off the plane.

I rolled over on my side, facing away from Li-Hahn, and tried to get some rest.

It did not come easily.

*The end of book one**

Metempsychosis Apotheosis Continues with Book Two available July 15th 2022!

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

“Welcome to Transmigration Studios!” the woman said as Li-Hahn and I entered their office. “Please have a seat in the waiting room, and someone will be with you shortly.”

Li-Hahn gripped my arm as we walked into the waiting area. She had her phone out and took a selfie of us as we walked. I could hear the blip of reactions as she grinned for the camera, panned around, then logged off with a “Byeeee!”

High-backed leather chairs arranged back to back stretched across the room with dozens of potential candidates relaxing and chatting quietly.

“Hello Mr. And Mrs. Adamson, my name is Richard and I will be your guide this evening.” The man was tall, thin, and had an effeminate face with sculpted eyebrows, slicked-back blond hair, and appeared to be wearing subtle makeup.

“Hello Richard, you can call me Robert, and this is my wife Karyn.”

“Pleased to meet you.” He shook both of our hands. I noticed his nails were perfectly polished and extended.

“Can I get you anything before the screening?” Richard said. “We have soft drinks, champagne, cheese, and crackers...”

“Some water would be nice,” I said.

“Champagne!” Li-Hahn said. “I love champagne.”

Richard gave a small smile and nodded. “Of course, be right back.”

I glanced around the room, trying to catalog everything I could. It appeared each chair had a ‘guide’ or assistant assigned to it and each assistant had up to a dozen that they serviced.

Richard came back with our drinks and said the screening would begin momentarily. He handed us some VR head and handsets and instructed us to put them on.

We went from a real-world waiting room into a virtual waiting room where our avatars stood in line at what looked like a roller coaster. As we waited, the roller coaster shot upwards at a gravity-defying angle, and I seriously hoped they wouldn’t be treating us to the same virtual ‘experience.’ My motion sickness would not allow any type of roller coaster, virtual or real.

“You’re next, and don’t worry,” Richards's voice came to us. “You won’t be riding a roller coaster, that’s just to keep you entertained as you wait.”

Finally, we passed through the starting position, and some questions came up on the screen. “Answer the following questions as honestly as possible. Tap the right button for yes, and the left button for now using your VR input devices.

“Are you satisfied with your life?” No, Yes.

“Do you have hope for your future?” No, Yes.

“Does the thought of being in someone else’s body excite you?” No, Yes

“If given the opportunity, would you change bodies?” No, Yes

“Can you keep a secret?” No, Yes

“Have you ever not kept a secret?” No, Yes

“Are you keeping a secret right now?” No, Yes.

“Do you abuse drugs or alcohol?” No, Yes

“Have you ever been convicted of a crime?” No, Yes

“Are there any current warrants for your arrest that you know of?” No,
Yes

“Do you owe taxes?” No, Yes

“Have you ever considered suicide?” No, Yes

“Do you believe in life after death?” No, yes.

“Do you believe in God?” No, yes

“Do you believe in an afterlife?” No, yes

“Is there such a thing as bad luck?” No, Yes

I answered them in the manner of what I thought someone who wanted a ‘new life’ would answer. The questions grew more and more difficult as they went along, with some rephrasing questions that had already been asked. “Have you ever not kept a secret” became “Have you ever revealed a secret?” “Do you owe taxes,” became “do you have unpaid taxes?”

It frustrated me and as the questions went on and on, they changed...

“Have you ever lost someone you loved?”

“Has someone ever disappeared from your life that you cared about?”

“Are you here to find someone?”

“Are you here on behalf of someone else?”

“Are you married?”

“Are you faithful to your marital vows?”

“Do you suspect your spouse is not who they say they are?”

Stunned, I quickly realized I wasn't the first person who had tried this.

After an hour, the questions finally finished, and I took off my headset. Li-Hahn smiled at me as she sipped from her champagne flute.

Richard appeared. “I see you have completed your session. Part two will begin shortly. Is there anything I can get you?”

I sighed. I knew I'd tried to do the best I could with the questions, but I had stupidly come to this event as 'me' not even trying to hide my identity. Of course, they would know who I was, who Karyn was, what I was attempting to do.

“No, I'm good,” I said.

A dark-skinned gentleman appeared from somewhere, dressed in a very white tailored suit with gleaming white loafers. He stretched above me, maybe 6'5" with a bald head, and a perfectly sculpted beard that angled up his jaw.

“Mr. Adamson, I'd like to speak with you.” The guy had a deep rich voice.

This was it.

“Sure.” I laughed, nervously. “Hope I haven't done anything wrong.”

“Of course not. Please come this way.”

I noticed Li-Hahn hadn't been invited. She gave a giggle. “Do good, babe!”

I brushed her cheek with my lips and followed him.

We walked past dozens of people either with VR headsets on still, or waiting and chatting softly.

I was led to an immense office with a huge old-fashioned oak desk. Plush red carpet, bookshelves with hundreds of old books, and a round conference table.

He went to the desk and sat in a richly cushioned desk chair and indicated I should sit in the chair opposite.

“You know who I am.” He leaned back in his chair, regarding me with eyes that belonged on a shark.

“ExMuritious Forrester.”

“I figured you to do your homework, Robert.”

I nodded, nervous. I wondered if security agents would come in from all sides of the office and burly men would throw me out.

He looked at me, his eyes locked on mine. I realized this was a test of sorts and I didn't flinch or turn away nervously. I was angry. I wanted Karyn back, and this was the man who could get it done.

“What are you doing here, Robert?”

I shrugged. “Well, it seemed like a good thing at the time.”

He nodded and turned to a laptop next to him. “Sold your house, car, boat, depleted most of your retirement...”

I looked down at my hands.

“So what, four hundred K?”

“A little under three.”

He nodded, rubbing his chin. “And so what, you hoped to do what exactly with that?”

I shrugged. “Get a new life, I suppose.”

He frowned. “And why would you want that?”

“Well, Karyn did it, didn’t she?”

He sighed. “I think your intentions were a bit less honorable. You know we have your wife in our system.”

“I just want her back,” I said. And my voice broke as I said it.

“So what, you were going to swap into a body and...”

Defeated, I sighed. “Get on the inside. Find out about your organization. I know you must have an insurance agency wrapped up somewhere here.”

“Ah, and you thought you’d be able to work for them and somehow stop a machine from operating that has been functioning for over 300 generations?”

“Something like that.”

“You know, we’ve had your kind before.” He made a motion on his screen and another screen behind him lit up. Profile photos of different people flicked across the screen.

“David Greenfeld, Akron Ohio. Now deceased.”

“Jennifer Bolden, Denver Colorado. Now Deceased.”

“James Cox, Detroit Michigan, Now Deceased.”

I shivered. Obviously, they didn’t fuck around.

“Want to know what these people all had in common?”

Ice water flowed through my veins. “They all had a partner who had been taken by you?”

He nodded, solemnly.

“So you’re going to kill me then?”

He flipped the screen off. “Depends on you. You’re a smart man. Based on your screening results, you pass. I could allow you to participate in the event and get a new life.

“Or?”

“Or, your body will be found in the next two weeks. Natural causes, I assure you.”

“So there’s no chance of ever being reunited with Karyn?” I said, and my voice hitched again.

“I didn’t say that, did I?”

I shook my head, closing my eyes.

“We don’t encourage it, it’s true. But your wife has been extremely cooperative and is earning her way up. She will never again achieve her own body back, but eventually, she will work her way into a life that is—“

ExMuritious leaned back considering. “Manageable.”

“And I can be with her then?”

He nodded.

“And what do I have to do?”

“Well, you have a choice. You can run, of course, but we will find you. I can promise that. Or, you can take part in tomorrow’s event, get a new life, and be happy. Then when your partner has earned her way through, you can be reunited.”

“Can’t I pay to be reunited now?”

He grinned.

“What if I choose to just leave and go back and wait?”

He shook his head. “That ship has sailed, Robert. I think you know that.”

“And how long until we can be reunited?”

The man bobbed his head from side to side. “Hard to find obedient workers like your wife. Ten, twelve years maybe?”

My stomach turned to concrete. Whom would she be then? Karyn, my happy-go-lucky life-filled wife would be someone completely different,

probably was already as different as Li-Hahn out there was to her former self.

I knew the technique. ExMuritious was making things seem like this was my only option, this was my only path. I knew I had a lot of options in front of me, I could go to law enforcement, but I'd need incontrovertible proof that this dark organization existed. And who would believe me when I tell them this company, traded on Nasdaq was stealing bodies?

"I can see what you're thinking," ExMuritious said.

"Yeah, and what's that?"

He grinned, even white teeth shining perfectly. "You're thinking you could go to a three-letter agency and turn this all over to them, what you've found, what's happened, etc."

"The thought had crossed my mind."

To that, I say this: he pressed a button on his tablet.

A picture sprang up on the display behind him. It appeared to be a busy restaurant, a diner of some kind, and patrons ate at different tables, passing in front of the camera as they sat down.

They spoke a different language, Spanish would be my guess. An older waitress stepped out from the back carrying a platter full of food and started handing them to the patrons.

She spoke something and the entire table erupted in laughter. Her iron-grey hair was pulled up into a neat bun, and she wore a white apron tied around her stout form.

"I take it the waitress is Karyn."

ExMuritious shook his head. "Dishwasher."

I stood up and peered at the diner, toward the back someone was washing dishes. Male, they appeared to be in their late fifties, with a stooped back,

and when they turned toward the camera I could see he had few teeth. His skin was very tan, and his hair was thin and also grey.

“That’s Margarita and Edmundo Salazar, and they own La Patria Cafe in Hermosillo, Mexico.”

“And Karyn is...”

He nodded. “We find gender flips to be especially motivational. I doubt your wife reaches out, however she’s been doing it, in this incarnation.”

So he knew she’d been reaching out, but not how. That was good information.

“And you’re saying if I go to the authorities...”

He shrugged. “Edmundo is stabbed during a mugging, hit by a bus, slips on a bar of soap in the cafe. Any number of things. Or perhaps we relegate her consciousness to an octogenarian suffering from Alzheimer’s. The options are endless. It will take time for any agency to build a case, Robert, time your wife cannot afford.”

“So you have me by the balls, it would seem.”

He smiled. “Indeed.”

“So there’s no other choices? What if I become...what was her name, Margarita?”

“The transmigrations are assigned by lottery, Robert. I’m afraid even if I wanted to pair you two up, it wouldn’t work out.”

I sighed and wiped my hand over my forehead.

“Look, go back to the hotel, rest, reflect on our conversation. I’m going to approve your attendance at the event. Look over the lives offered, make a bid, don’t make a bid, whatever you’d like to do. I can guarantee you at least one of our offerings tomorrow will be within your price range.”

“You know, Li-Hahn was broadcasting on Tawkback when she entered the event tonight.”

ExMuritious blinked. “I’m sorry?”

I nodded. “If you think your event is so secret, why was she broadcasting a live stream as she entered?”

ExMuritious frowned. “This is news to me.”

“She’s a loose cannon.”

ExMuritious nodded. “Well, live streams can be eliminated.”

“Yeah? You know how many followers she has?”

He smiled. “Well, we used influencers from the beginning since they are admired by so many people. It’s concerning, but we’ll take care of Li-Hahn.”

“What if I take over my wife’s body and hold it for her until she can be returned?”

He seemed to give that some thought for all of about two seconds. “Li-Hahn bid nearly two million euros for it. Can you match that?”

“No, but she’s also had a lot of plastic surgery done that must lower the value.”

“True,” ExMuritious said. But not what, one point eight million euros worth.”

“What if I work for you?”

“In what capacity?”

“Well, I’m sure you’re insured. I’ve been dealing with corporate-level insurance for the past nine years. I could make sure your claims are vetted, that you have the best representation with carriers, pre-vet incidents...I could be a real asset.”

“And in exchange, what do you get?”

“Karyn’s body, until such a time you can let her be with me.”

“Hmm, that might be...advantageous to us.”

“I will work hard, and I will be loyal, I give you my word.”

He smiled a shark’s smile. “So no live streams?”

“None.”

He stood up. “Go back to your hotel. Let me look into some things. Perhaps we can work together.”

I nodded and stood up. I held out my hand. “To future endeavors together.”

He held back. “To future *possible* endeavors.”

“Agreed.”

We shook. His hand was very large and enveloped mine.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The party was already in full swing when we arrived. I would have been on time, but Li-Hahn now took extra time to get prepared and had zero ability to estimate preparation duration. She wore a sleek, sheer dress of what appeared to be spun gold that clung invitingly to every over-abundant curve on her body highlighting and accentuating her backside and front side to everyone at the party.

Considering the amount of rain, I was amazed she wasn't frozen half to death, but she wore an immense faux mink coat and hat while outside and I dutifully provided an umbrella so she could make her 'grand entrance.'

Of course, her phone was out and on a selfie-stick so she could record her entrance for her fans. I thought it was supposed to be a secret society, but if that were true now everyone on Tawk and Tweet knew about it.

We wore masks covering our faces. Li-Hahn wore an anthro-cat mask with a realistic nose and whiskers that twitched occasionally. I wore a crow's head with real feathers and a beak that opened and closed whenever

I spoke. They were eerily realistic, and cost a small fortune, but Li-Hahn assured me everyone would be cloaked.

We arrived, and almost immediately, our coats and Li-Hahn's phone was confiscated. She had a "signing off for now peeps!" quick close, and placed her precious mobile device in the basket. I also relinquished my phone.

As we progressed through the cluster of people who had gathered at the front door, I saw masks of creatures of all kinds from a bull's head with red glowing eyes and steam coming from the muzzle to a human peacock with colored feathers and an enormous fan displayed behind. I couldn't tell the gender of the peacock, it might have been a pea-hen.

We were handed champagne flutes and I helped Li-Hahn down the spiral, red-carpeted staircase to the marble floor below.

"How are we supposed to drink with these masks on?" I said once we'd made it to the main floor.

"There's a straw fastened to the inside cheek of your costume, silly," Li-Hahn said, carefully extricating hers and setting it into the champagne flute. I found the coiled piece of surgical tubing and followed suit.

The champagne was amazing. And helped to calm my nerves a great deal. A few moments later, immense speakers somewhere began to intone: "Please make your way into the theater."

We walked into the small auditorium which was set up like a 'theater in the round' with a central stage that had black curtains drawn around it. We each picked up a tablet, a special stylus, and a crimson robe was wrapped around our shoulders by someone.

Li-Hahn and I made our way to our seats. My stomach flipped as everyone in their masks and robes assumed seats all around the stage. There were no empty seats.

The doors were closed and an immense screen lit up above the stage.

“Welcome to a Transmigration Studios production: Revival.” Intoned a voice, several voices of different pitches as the text was displayed on the screen.

Music poured out of discreet speakers all around as a light display began above the stage. The word ‘Revival’ flittered in different texts, disappearing and reappearing with visual effects. The voices spoke again:

“Metempsychosis, the ability to shift from one living being to another is a centuries-long practice developed by Tibetan monks and other faith-based entities around the world. Transmigration studios patented process allows YOU to become another, wearing another body, becoming another life.”

The curtain slowly drew up and a number of individuals stood on the stage in the spotlight. Naked, they all had their arms held up with eyes open, feet standing shoulder-width apart. The music rose in both breadth and intensity as light bathed each individual from above and below, and profile pictures above their head detailed Name, age, country, and other details with social media pics of their past.

“This is a silent auction so if you see someone you would like to become, simply enter an amount on the tablet you were given and press the ‘lock it in’ icon. There will be multiple rounds of bidding with the highest bid in each round spoken. When no more bids are received the winning bid will be announced.

Did I really want to participate in this? I still hadn’t heard from ExMuritious on my possible arrangement, and Li-Hahn had done yet another live stream at the beginning of the event, so they couldn’t be too cautious about word getting out. In fact, it probably boosted their

membership when well-known influencers spoke about this ‘secret organization.’

Most of the people on display were about my age, mid thirties. I wondered if they grouped people based on age and socio-economic level.

“Our bidding commences with auction number one on your tablet. Rosalyn Joubert is French Canadian, living in Quebec Canada. She is 36 years old and measures five feet eleven inches tall, with a forty-two-inch bust, thirty-seven inch waist, and forty-eight-inch hip. She has long brown hair and a cherubic cute face.”

“Rosalyn, or Rosie as she is known by her friends, is a travel agent with the prestigious Global Tourisme International where she was the agent of the year for six out of the last nine years. She has many friends, a brother, and two sisters, and a lovely dachshund named Peter!”

They showed a dog on the screen with Rosalyn holding him up to the camera with a wide grin.

“Rosalyn last had a health checkup in January and aside from a slightly elevated blood pressure is in excellent shape albeit a few pounds overweight that she is working on.

The body was lit with green light on the stage below and numbers started scrolling on the ‘current bid’ section both on my tablet and on above the person.

She stared blankly out at the audience, held in place by some type of force field or other invisible force. I wondered if she was conscious and could hear the bidding going on around her.

The numbers scrolled upwards and quickly eclipsed any bid I might be able to enter.

They slowed down around one million euros, with the light changing to flashing orange.

“Our bidding will stop in ten seconds, nine, eight, seven...”

The light turned red and the winning bid was one point two million euros.

I sighed. If I took part in the bidding, I risked losing the chance at Karyn’s body if they decided to do something with Li-Hahn. If I didn’t bid, I risked being unalived in the next couple of weeks.

“We progress to auction two: Thulani Oluwaseun Temitope. Thulani is a native of Kenya and he speaks fluent Swahili and English. Thulani is one point nine five meters tall and weighs eighty-five kilograms. He has a twenty-seven-inch chest, twenty-two-inch waist, and twenty-four-inch hip. As you can see, Thulani is healthy, thin, and in his last physical assessment, he was in nearly perfect condition!

Thulani drives a bus in Mombasa, lives in an apartment with his wife and daughter, and is currently enrolled at Mombasa University studying physics. Thulani has a few friends, a very large extended family, and loves the outdoors. He’s recently begun exploring tribal ceremonies and enjoys them.

Thulani’s daughter is the love of his life, and he would do anything to protect her.

The picture on the screen showed a dark-skinned man and a young girl who gave such a sweet smile. The audience gave a low ‘awww’ in response.

It wouldn’t be a bad life to assume. He was healthy, young, in shape...no money, but that could be rectified. I glanced over at Li-Hahn who wore a perpetual grin.

“I bet he has an enormous cock,” she said, then slid her tongue between her teeth.

“Think I should bid?”

“I also like number 14,” she said.

I glanced down at my tablet. Fourteen was an American shoe salesman from Idaho. He had prematurely bald hair and wore thick glasses.

“Hell, I’m better than that,” I said. “Wouldn’t be an upgrade.”

“I know, darling, it’s the idea of being in another life that is exciting, isn’t it?”

No, not at all. “Of course,” I said with mock excitement.

“Bid on this one, but if you don’t get him, bid on fourteen?”

I sighed, wondering if ExMuritious would do anything about Li-Hahn. I hated to put any money into the play if my plan could have worked out.

I was just about to reach over and place a bid when two men entered our booth.

“Ms. Adamson, come with us.”

Li-Hahn looked at me, her face a mask of terror. “Darling!”

“You better go with them, honey. They sound serious.”

“What’s this all about?” she said, and her voice was louder than it should have been.

“Please come with us, Miss.” The men grabbed her by the arm and started pulling her out of the box.

I got up to follow, but a third man stepped between us. “Hold up.”

It was ExMuritious. I recognized his voice.

“Let’s talk.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I was led to a small lounge off the main auditorium. Rich crimson velvet covered chaise lounges and a small settee where a table had been setup with a thick packet of documents.

ExMuritious took off the bulls-head mask he'd been wearing. "I hate these. Feel like I'm suffocating."

I took mine off too. When in Rome.

"Can I get you any refreshment?"

"No thank you."

He indicated I should sit on the chaise lounge. It had an awkward back, and when I sat back in it I felt uncomfortable so I sat on the front of the seat and tried to look dignified.

"So, we had a lot of discussion about your offer, and your case."

This is what I'd hoped for. "Oh?"

"Indeed." He pushed the packet over to me.

I flipped open the cover of the folder.

OFFER OF EMPLOYMENT, the first line read.

I scanned through the document. Basically, they wanted to bring me in to work for them. Interestingly, I wouldn't be working for Transmigration Studios, but directly for Lord Mallory Incorporated as an insurance analyst. The pay was three times what I currently earned.

"Generous," I said. The package included health, dental, a vehicle, executive apartment, all in New York City.

"New York," I said.

"It's where LMI corporate headquarters are located. Do you have an issue with that?"

"No, I already sold my house just to be here tonight."

Exmuritious nodded. "We recognize that."

I nodded and continued reading. "What's One Free Experience of my Choice?"

Exmuritious nodded. "This, what is happening now. What do you know about Metempsychosis?"

"Not much, honestly, other than you can be put into another body."

ExMuritious held out his hands. "Orpheus wrote that soul and body are united by a compact unequally binding on either. The soul is divine, immortal and aspires to freedom, while the body holds it in fetters as a prisoner. Death dissolves this compact, but only to re-imprison the liberated soul after a short time, for the wheel of birth revolves inexorably."

I nodded.

"After death the soul continues on, alternating between unrestrained existence and fresh reincarnation."

"Okay," I said.

“Transmigration studios has discovered a process in which metempsychosis can be tightly controlled. The soul is released into the next viable container, by inducing a state of ‘death’ in the corporeal body, and vice versa.”

“So in order to be born again, first you have to die.”

He grinned. “I think we have a new Masthead.”

“I’m adept at cutting through bullshit.”

“Through induction, we can allow the original soul to vacate, and the new soul to enter. But that’s not all.”

“Of course not.”

He smiled. “We can also manipulate the what that is transferred. Entire new personalities can be crafted through soul composition. Old habits can be eradicated and new ones put in place. We can mix and mingle personality traits, habits, abilities, skills, and even memories.”

“That’s a little scary,” I said. “You’ve taken over for God in other words.”

He shrugged his shoulders and made a more or less than sign with his hands. “Not as extreme, but we can provide a conduit for a new life, a new existence. We call them an Experience.

“I see. So you could create an entirely new existence for me.”

He let his finger drop. “Exactly.”

“But all I want to do is be reunited with my wife.”

He nodded and sat back down. “Which leads us to part two.”

“Which is?”

He sighed. “Li-Hahn, the consciousness that is Li-Hahn, has broken the Terms of Service by livestream. We thank you for bringing that to our attention.”

“So you can put my wife back in her body?”

He nodded. “We’d be willing to do that.”

He looked at me silently.

“That’s it?” I asked. It seemed too good to be true.

“The physical alterations Li-Hahn induced into that body has actually decreased the value. People are much more apt to select a body that is natural over one that has been physically altered.”

“Right...”

“So the value we assign to her vessel is lower than when Li-Hahn took on her Experience.”

“I think I see where you’re going.”

“Regardless, it’s valued at approximately one point four million euros.”

“Hence the job offer.”

“Exactly. You use the one free Experience to place your wife back in her body, and you go to work for Transmigration Studios as an insurance analyst.”

“How long would I have to work for you?”

“The term of this contract is five years.”

“So, just to get this straight. You put my wife back in her body, and I work for you for five years, and then we’re done?”

He shook his head. “Unfortunately, the one free experience is paid out at the end of the contract, not the beginning. It would be too easy to break the contract otherwise.”

I sighed. “So, what happens to Karyn’s body in the meantime? The five years that I’d be working? And what happens to Karyn’s consciousness?”

“Look, we aren’t without a heart, Robert.” Exmuritious stood up and looked out the window into the rainy night. “We know that happy

employees equal loyal employees.”

“Well, what would make me happy is to have Karyn in her body while I work for LMI.”

“And what would keep you from running off to Sweden or some other foreign points unknown after a couple of weeks working now that you’re reunited with your wife?”

“My word?”

He smiled. “I’m sure you know even the most compliant employees can become disgruntled at the smallest slight. We don’t want to be constantly watching you, Robert, so that doesn’t work for us.”

“Well, what would?”

“You have some choices. One: You could be dropped into your wife’s body and I can make arrangements for your wife to be relocated to New York City. I don’t have the ability to determine which Experience she’ll be placed into, but you would be able to connect and I can also make the arrangement that she stay in New York for the duration of your stay. At the end, we can swap you and your wife’s place so she’d be back in her body, but your physical body would go up for auction today.”

I winced at that. I didn’t really want to be in her body.

Two: Your wife is relocated back into her body, and you would be placed into a NYC experience location and rotation. You’d be expected to follow the demands of the rotation AND serve as analyst in your off hours. Due to the nature of your job, a lot of work can be performed off hours and online so we wouldn’t need you during your rotation hours.

“Sounds like I’d be working myself to death.”

“We have people in this position already. Working both for TS and serving in a rotation.”

A third option would be for your wife's body to be auctioned again today, and you can choose to go into an Experience, or we can upload your wife into a stable Experience inside someone else. Or if you have a suggestion for another arrangement. We do look forward to working with you and think it can be beneficial for all parties."

I nodded and ground my teeth. So I could become Karyn, go into someone random in NYC and work two full time jobs, or let Karyn's body slip through my fingers.

"What if I go into Karyn's body and she goes into mine for the duration of my work? That way you can still keep tabs on us and you have something to hold over my head."

Exmuritious nodded, bobbing his head back and forth. "Hmm...possible. But they are both excellent bodies in good shape, who's to say you still don't run off to sell hemp jewelry at the seaside in Bogota?"

"I don't want to be a woman," I said. "That will keep us here."

"But once you are in the Experience, your mind adapts very quickly."

I sighed. "I thought you could control all of that, like you said."

"Yes..." He trailed off thoughtfully.

After a few minutes, I got impatient. "Well?"

He sighed. "It's a complex problem. We ran the invitation to media influencers in the first place because we knew we'd get new blood into the system. That has definitely happened, but as you can imagine, we've also had a few issues like this."

I nodded.

"Normal situations, we don't interact with the spouse. At all. Hard stop. But, I've been over your employment record, details, all of it, and I think you could be a super addition to our team."

“I agree. I’d love the job, and you can also probably tell I’m loyal and dedicated.”

“I just can’t agree to the body swap idea. Perhaps after you’ve been on the job a few months we can circle back on that. But right now, I need you to decide if you will be going into your wife’s body, or if she will be returning and you will be serving her rotation.”

“Let’s put Karyn back in her body, then,” I said, between gritted teeth. I was basically going to become their slave, but at least my wife would be safe.

“Are you sure?” Exmuritious said. “I know she is currently male, but she is heavily slated to be female for most of her rotation. In fact, you might never return to being male again.”

“Well, after I earn another Experience, I can elect that, yes?”

“Correct.”

“What happens to my body?”

“It will go up for auction, next month.”

“So I have thirty days to make enough to earn it back?”

Exmuritious shrugged his shoulders. “If you’d like to see it that way, yes.”

“And my wife will know who and where I am?”

“Of course. You’ll be able to stay in the executive apartment and all the other perks associated with your high profile position.”

“And when will she get her body back?”

He stood up, setting the contracts in front of me. “Tonight.”

I frowned. “I thought she was in Mexico?”

“That was a recording. She’s here actually. We...figured this might be the direction you would go.”

I sighed.

“Look, it’s a great job, great benefits, and I’ll see if we can reduce the manual labor portion. It all depends on you, now, you understand Robert?”

“Yeah.” I scribbled my signature on several different places.

“Perfect.” He smiled, standing up. “Well, let’s get you out of that body and into your new life!”

“Grand,” I said, and followed him out the door.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I expected to be led to some kind of science fictiony, strange or mystical apparatus. Maybe a glowing sphere that I'd stare into, or some kind of booth that would be hooked up to another booth. Perhaps a glowing helmet that had thousands of connections to an apparatus that connected to another helmet. Science Fiction and Fantasy stories abounded with body-switching devices of all kinds.

The room had tan tatami mats. Incense burned from several locations in the room, and pleasant music was piped in through an excellent sound system. It all had an Asian feel to it, with mixtures of other forms. I noticed some writing that looked Runic and patterns that could have come from Native American galleries arranged on the walls.

There was an entry area with a single wooden bench made of rich dark wood with the seat lifting up on both sides.

An older man sat in the middle of a patch of sand, with a stylus that hung from the ceiling. He was naked except for brief underclothes that hid his

groin. He grinned at me, and I could see he only had a single tooth.

Exmuritious patted me on the shoulder. “Take off your clothes in the dressing room and sit on one of the mats, with legs crossed. Your Guide will assist from there.”

“Guide?” I said.

He nodded to the gentleman holding the enormous stylus. “This is Pen-loc and he will be assisting you today.”

Pen-loc grinned a gap-toothed grin and indicated I should sit on the mat to the right of him.

I undressed and laid my clothes on the bench. I pulled up the loose cotton undergarment so my nether regions were covered and went into the room.

Stepping stones in the sand led to two mats. I stepped on each one in turn, then sat on the mat to Pen’s right. I had to step over a wooden frame patterned with hundreds of mystic symbols laid on the floor.

I heard sounds coming from the other side of the room as the door slid open then shut off another dressing area.

A heavysset woman stepped out from behind the screen and walked along the stone path to the tatami mat opposite me where she knelt silently. She wore a cotton wrap around her bosom and midsection. Her salt and pepper hair was curly and set into position with what must have been a great deal of hair spray. She also wore heavy makeup, mascara, and had extended fingernails.

She looked at me, and her face split into a grin. “Oh, my gawd!” she said softly, only to be hushed by Pen.

Stunned, I looked down. Was that what I’d signed up for? Her heavy perfume, hairspray, and deodorant filled the room and I nearly gagged. I was really going to have to live in this person?

I thought about Karyn, and how happy she would be back in her own body. Even as modified as it was, at least she'd be back and we could be together again. I could put up with a few weeks of being an old woman for that, and a few years of being in different bodies. At least we were back on track. We could achieve some kind of normalcy in New York City.

I glanced at the woman, who grinned and waved at me.

Normalcy, I hoped.

The old man began to hum. He had several items in front of him that he uncovered. They appeared to be different bowls of various sizes and textures. One was green and looked like pure jade. One was white made out of marble or quartz. Another was deep blue, and another amethyst. The final was black so dark it almost didn't appear to be there.

He took out some kind of instrument and began running it along the outside of the rim of the white bowl. A hum filled the air, and he matched the pitch with his voice. It made me shiver. The sound filled my soul and touched me in different spiritual places. The sound grew louder as he moved his hand faster, and took out another instrument to stroke the black bowl. It had a much deeper tone, an octave below the first.

I shivered again as the sound cascaded around me. My eyes closed and sound enveloped me, surrounding me, encapsulating me. I trembled in the grip of the sonic bath. After a few moments, I was able to open my eyes again as the sound drifted away and I saw he had set one of the implements down and taken up the stylus. He set it to move around us in a gyre shape, the point of the stylus tracing a line in the sand. With each pass, it grew nearer and nearer to me. I wondered what would happen if it struck me.

He started running the implements around each of the red, blue, green, and purple bowls. At first, I didn't feel anything, but then as he made

contact with the amethyst, I felt something stirring inside of me, an excitement, something centered in my groin that made me want to loose my bladder, briefly.

He made turns around the ruby and amethyst bowls intermittently as the stylus swung nearer and nearer.

Fire blossomed in a bowl between us, and sweet-smelling smoke filled the air. At first, I coughed a bit, but then the sounds relaxed me, and I inhaled the smoke, listening to the sound and letting the smoke penetrate me. My eyes shut again, and I could see images from my life flitting past. I remembered being a small child and riding my tricycle falling over and landing on an ant that bit the center of my palm. It was my first memory of pain.

My fifth birthday, my mom smiled as she lit the candles. Christmas, when I was seven and getting a new bike. Junior high, and being teased for being so small, but then growing when I was a freshman in high school. Photography club, my first kiss, my first date, and fumbling with her bra strap. Jumping into the river from a cliff, fishing at a lake with my dad, playing pirates with my sister. Memories cascaded through my brain and I felt a wind on my face, blowing harder and harder, my eyes shut tighter and tighter.

A maelstrom swept over me. Memories and images, feelings and emotions, all my desires, wants, needs, swept into a towering tunnel of wind dancing across the sand. I don't know if I screamed or laughed, the sound, air, wind, and fire consumed me, lifting me...

And then it was over. I could hear the soft music, smell the sandalwood incense. My heart pounded strangely in my chest, ka-thrum, ka-thrum,

feeling different. Breath flowed in and out of me, but my chest felt restricted, tight, and it felt like I couldn't get enough air.

I opened my eyes to see someone sitting across from me, a naked man, and Pen-loc was now on my right? I didn't see the woman any—

I glanced down and saw sagging breasts with enormous areolas and nipples. I wasn't in my body!

Suddenly, I couldn't breathe, like I'd forgotten how and I started to hyperventilate.

“Easy does it hon, is this your first time, or what?”

The voice came from across from me, my voice! But tinged with a New York accent, ‘your’ became ‘yoah.’

Pen-loc put a hand on my knee, and I immediately calmed down, my chest able to draw air clearer and more freely.

“You got stress-induced asthma now, sweetheart.” My body stood up, looked down at his hands and arms, peeking under his loincloth, and nodded. “Oh, very nice. This is a great body, hon, why would you ever give it up?” The accent was harsh; ‘body’ became ‘bwady.’

I stood up, stiffly. We'd been seated longer than I thought.

“I have...reasons,” I said. My voice came out thick and low and I coughed a little. I needed something, the smoke from the incense induced a craving inside me. I also wanted a drink, no needed a drink, whiskey and ginger ale with a twist of lime...

Pen-loc waved me toward the dressing room behind me, grinning his gap-toothed grin. I sighed and followed the stones with my new feet. Everything seemed to jiggle or ripple.

Her clothes hung neatly on hangers I had missed when I'd disrobed on the other side of the room. Undergarments sat in a folded pile on the single

bench. I took out the panties and groaned at the size...easily triple my male boxers.

I stepped into them and slipped them up my thighs. Silk, they felt nice against my smooth skin. The next item was the enormous brassiere. I checked the label and saw I now wore 44DD. Sighing, I placed a breast in each cup, then put my arms through the straps. How the hell did women fasten these at the back?

Something inside me had me lean forward, then my arms quickly slipped the fittings in the back. I then slid my fingers around the cups, seating them inside.

I sat on the bench and looked down at my body. I was heavy, and even the little exertion from putting on the bra winded me. I took out her slacks and put them on, pulling them up over my large behind and fastening them at the waist. Then I pulled on the top, a flowery sweater that settled around me, comfortable and warm. I slipped on sheer ankle socks and low heels.

Standing, I wavered a bit. I was glad she hadn't worn high heels, these were going to take some getting used to as it was.

I left the dressing area and into a restroom where I could see my face in the mirror.

"God, Robert, what have you gotten yourself into now," I said in that scratchy low voice she had. I ran my fingers through my fluffy curly black and gray hair, pulled out a tube of lipstick from my purse, and fixed it up without thinking.

Exmuritious met me outside the door. "Good, we're about to start Karyn's exchange. How did it go?"

"Well, I'm a woman now, aren't I?"

He nodded. “Your wife should be out soon. Why don’t you go into the waiting room and go over your experience packet and start your induction? The first session only takes about 20 minutes and by that time she should be out.”

“Okay,” I said and made my way to the waiting room.

What had I gotten myself into?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

I wiggled and jiggled my way over to the waiting room. As I passed through the doorway, my hip bumped the doorframe and I winced.

“Ow, dammit!”

I rubbed it and felt the loose flesh roll under my fingers, wincing when it touched the bruised area. My body was wider and shorter than I had been and it was going to take some time to get used to.

A packet was left on the shelf of the sliding window with “Robert Adamson” on the sticker. I picked it up, then sat down.

Opening it, I saw a welcome letter.

WELCOME TO YOUR NEW LIFE EXPERIENCE Robert Adamson!

You have been placed into the life experience of Joyce Reagan. She is a 62 year-old hair-dresser and fashion designer who lives in Queens New York where she has lived her entire life. She works at “Curly Sue’s” Beauty

Parlor, has a dog named Mr. Patty that she usually takes everywhere, is a heavy smoker, heavy drinker, and is not in the best of health.

You've been given a portable VR headset and headphone combination for the induction process. You will be given 15 sessions that cover all aspects of her life from friends and relatives, speech patterns and behaviors, work and home habits and skills, past history and relationships, and more. By the end of the 15 sessions you will know all there is about Joyce and more!

Once you have entered Joyce's life, we encourage you to take things slow. Tell people you are taking some time off, need some downtime, etc. Sleep helps the integration process, and you will find you will need many hours of sleep to start. During these times, you can play your induction sessions because they do their job while you sleep!

ADDENDUM: You have also been added to the staff of Lord Mallory Inc! Congratulations on your new and exciting career as an INSURANCE ANALYST position! We want to make your onboarding as smooth as possible so you can integrate into our staff environment and get to work as soon as possible!

Included in this packet are:

**Executive Apartment address, location, and keycodes*

**Company vehicle parking location and keycodes.*

**Parking Validation*

**Subway pass*

**Health Insurance Questionnaire (prefilled)*

**Technology Use Contract*

**Kogobook Tablet*

**Miscellaneous*

Work Hours: Lord Mallory INC: M-F 8-5 PM

Curly Sues: M-F 6-10 pm

Sat: 8-10pm

I sank in my chair reading those hours. How on earth was I going to be able to work that much? Especially as a 62-year-old out-of-shape woman with health problems?

The packet went into detail regarding dress codes (Business casual for Lord Mallory, Smock and uniform for Curly Sue's), parking instructions for the apartment, and other sundry items.

I looked at the VR helmet and put it on. It had a power button on the side and was connected to my mobile device.

A chime sounded, and the screen materialized in front of me. Joyce Reagan Life Experience Induction Series. You will be presented with 15 induction programs that will acclimatize you to your new Life Experience. These will induce a hypnotic state within you, and you will not need to do anything other than relax and allow the induction to complete. Once started, the induction cannot be interrupted for any reason. They will take approx ninety minutes to complete and you will not notice the passage of time while the induction program is running.

Are you ready to complete Induction One Behavior and Habits?

I saw a red NO button and a green YES button. With my right hand, I moved my 'cursor' to yes, and 'clicked it, by blinking my eyes.'

White static noise filled the screen. Frowning, I wondered when the program would start. A few moments later the static cleared and said END

PROGRAM? Y, N.

That was strange. I blinked on the Yes, and the screen returned to transparent.

I took it off and stared at the headset. I thought it must be defective, so I decided to find Exmuritious and let him know. I was strangely stiff and sore which...

“Oh, perfect.” A deep voice said from the doorway. “Your wife just completed her transition, also.”

“Wait, what?” I said.

He grinned. “It’s always like that the first time. You’ve been in here over two hours.”

I blinked. “How can that be possible?”

“The induction process inhibits your time sense. It’s not like sleeping, you feel like you literally don’t exist for the time your under.”

That scared me. What kind of changes had they made? I was also weirdly lethargic like I needed to sleep.

“Follow me, and let’s reunite you with your wife. She’s excited to see you.”

“Oh, gawd, have you told her yet about me?”

“She’s had enough to deal with returning to her old body. You’ll need to ease her into it, I’m afraid.”

I nodded and hurried after him.

###

Karyn sat in a recovery chair, staring down at her body in horror, holding up a mirror to see her face. “What on earth happened to me?”

Exmuritious nodded. “The previous occupant thought she was going to be there for the rest of her life and decided to alter your visage.”

She looked into a hand mirror, brushing back the platinum locks. "I'm a bimbo! What the fuck!"

"Honey, it'll all be okay," I said. "At least you're back in your body."

For the first time I noticed that when I said body, it came out bawdy. I guess the induction program had an impact on me.

"Who are you?"

I smiled. "It's me, darling. Robbie."

She shook her head, closing her eyes, her tresses flailing back and forth.

"No, no, no, no no!"

I took her in my arms, holding her. "It's okay, sweetheart. It's not forever. We can get you all fixed back up again and back the way you were, you'll see!"

She stared up at me, tears streaming down her face. "Is that really you?"

"Your one and only goofball." I smiled, using her term of endearment for me.

She hugged me fiercely. It was an awkward sensation given we were both rather well endowed.

"Oh, God...Robbie, you don't know how awful it was in Mexico. I was a MAN!"

I smiled, "I heard."

"I mean, I know you're a woman now, but Jesus Robbie, how on EARTH did you ever get used to that between your legs? I mean, I must have racked myself fifteen times!"

I laughed.

She sighed. "And you did this for me? So I could be me again?"

"You know I would have done anything."

She nodded, crying, caressing my face. "But you're so old!"

“You know it’s only temporary. And we get to move to New York!”

Her eyes widened at that. “Really? Can we afford that?”

I nodded. “I’m going to be...ah...working for Lord Mallory Inc for a while. And then I get to earn back into a male body again!”

“How long will you have to work for them?”

Exmuritious smiled. “He will serve the rest of your rotation, Karyn. Half the length.”

“So like five years?”

I nodded, shrugging my shoulders. “Possibly. And I could possibly earn enough to get my own body back in thirty days if I can raise enough capital.”

She shook her head. “Okay, it’s a bit much to take in all at once, but I trust you, Robbie.”

“If you two will follow me, we can get you on your way to your new home,” Exmuritious said.

Karyn held my hand as we followed him, and I realized we were about the same size.

One month, Robbie, I thought. One month and I could get my body back and at least be with her as man and wife again.

It took an hour to get to the airport, and we were shortly in the air over the ocean.

“You sold the house?” Karyn said during our long plane flight.

“I needed capital in order to qualify for the event.”

“But, Robbie, our house?” She wiped tears from her eyes. “I loved our house.”

I shrugged. “We can always go back someday, honey. This is only temporary.”

“I know, I know.”

While we flew, I put on the VR headset and initiated induction sequence two: “Behaviors and Habits part Two.”

As before, it felt like I’d just put on the headset when the program ended and I took it off.

Karyn snored softly beside me, her head resting on my shoulder.

“Anything I can get you Ma’am?” the flight attendant said to me, after seeing I was awake.

“Gin and tonic, a twist of lime,” I said.

“Right away!”

She scurried away, and I shook my head, realizing how easy that came to me. As Robbie, I would have ordered a soft drink, but Joyce loved gin.

I looked down at my nails, and tisked. They needed repair. I dug in my purse and pulled out my nail kit.

I had a month to put together enough funding to return. While I hadn’t exhausted what I’d put together, the trip to Italy had cost a fortune. Regardless, I was still about a quarter of the way to what I’d need in a month in order to get back into my body.

It seemed wrong that I’d need to pay almost a million euros in order to be put back into my original body. But that was the crazy world I now circled. Bodies were a commodity, and I had to make up for the fact Karyn had hers stolen. That I was paying the people who stole it in the first place, did not escape me.

I was now on the inside and could operate to bring the whole thing down.

Flexing my right hand I looked at my nails. I'd put a fresh base coat while I'd been ruminating, and they looked much better.

Eighteen hours later, we were back in the States and in my new Executive Apartment. I'd put all of our stuff in storage back in Utah, but I had no idea if we'd need any of it since the apartment was fully furnished.

We were so exhausted, we didn't even look at the surroundings or the fact we had a gorgeous view of Manhattan. We shucked off clothing, and a few moments later we were asleep.

I wondered what the morning would bring.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Two Weeks Later

“Joyce, what’s wrong with you?” Sue, pulled my hand back from the curler I had just started to remove. “You have to use neutralizing solution before you remove those!”

“Oh, gawd, I’m sorry, Sue,” I said, reaching for the neutralizing solution on the counter. “I’m just so tired, I could cry.”

“Go home, get some sleep, girl,” Sue snatched the solution from my hand and started spreading it on the rollers I’d been working on. “You’re getting sloppy and you’re one of my best stylists!”

I closed my eyes and I could feel tears leaking out of the corners. “Okay, okay. I’ll be better tomorrow, you just wait and see!”

“I know you will, honey,” she said. “I don’t know what’s gotten into you lately, but you need to bounce back from this.”

Walking to the back room, I picked up my purse and put on my sunglasses. Pulling a cigarette out, I put it between my lips, but waited until

I was out of the salon to light it. Sue didn't like us smoking around the clients.

I walked down Franklin Avenue past Franklin Square and went down to the subway and waited for the next train. I could feel tears streaming down my face. What was wrong with me? Inhaling my cigarette, I tapped ashes to the side and stood staring into the middle distance, waiting for it to arrive. A busker played a guitar as a few kids danced.

Shaking my head from side to side, I felt myself wanting to fall asleep standing up. It had been a long two weeks learning the ropes at both workplaces and trying to fit into the life of Joyce Reagan while starting the new position at LMI.

Between settling Karyn into the executive apartment, learning the ropes at LMI, settling into the life of Joyce Reagan the hairstylist, food, utilities, getting to and from my two workplaces without tipping anyone off to my 'secret,' maintaining the illusion of Joyce's apartment in Queens...I was like the frayed ends of Karyn's over-processed hair.

Numbly, I took the elevator to the apartment in Manhattan. Karyn should be home, she was always home.

I opened the door and tossed my keys on the counter near the door. I could hear Karyn in the study squealing for the camera in one of her constant videos. I didn't want to disturb her, so I continued on down the hall to the bedroom where I kicked off my heels. Mr. Patty jumped off his bed and came to me, wagging his tiny tail. He was a chihuahua and perpetually shivered.

"Oh, Mr. Patty, have you been taken for your walk today?" I lifted him up and snuggled him under my chins. He licked me happily.

“Momma needs sleep,” I said, sitting down on the bed and kicking off my heels. I took off my earrings and put them on the nightstand, then slid between the sheets. The dog slid under the covers with me, wanting to be close, warm, and loved.

Sometime later, Karyn slipped between the covers and I noticed it was dark outside. It’s never quiet in New York, I could hear the sounds of the city muffled beyond the walls. Rolling over, I noticed I was still wearing the same clothes, so I got up and began the arduous daily task of getting ready for bed.

“You came home early,” Karyn said.

“Yeah, I was starting to make stupid mistakes at the salon, so Sue sent me home.”

“I still don’t understand why you have to hold down both jobs. I mean, you’re making ten times the salary at your insurance job.”

I washed my face, removed my makeup then pulled my eyelashes off one by one. After that, I took off my clothes and made sure they were piled neatly in the hamper before putting on a clean nightgown.

Being a woman was arduous and frustrating. From hair and makeup to nail and skin care, everything had a routine, everything had a product, and I was judged on my ability to create the perfect image of a busy working older woman. One slip, one hair out of place, one tooth not polished, one wrinkled garment, and I was judged and convicted before I had a chance to explain.

“We’ve been over this,” I said, sliding back under the covers and taking her into my arms. “I have to fulfill your end of the contract also. It was the only way I could get you back here.”

I kissed her softly, one eye at a time.

Things were definitely *different* now. I suppose I would have had the same reaction if Karyn were a man while I was a man. She had a hard time with the physicality, but slowly her barriers were coming down. We hadn't made love yet, but at least she let me hold her and kiss her.

"How close are you to the target amount to get your body back?" Karyn said, softly.

I sighed. "I'm more than halfway. What do you think about selling off my...I mean, Joyce's apartment? That will easily put me over the top, but, I don't know, it feels wrong somehow, like I'd be stealing it."

"Sue keeps telling you there are rooms above the salon too."

"That's what I mean. It's not like whoever inhabits Joyce after me won't have a place to be, she just won't have the apartment in Queens."

"I don't know, I say go for it," Karyn said, holding me tighter. It was a strange sensation being in a woman's body. The arousal didn't come from just one location but from all over. She kissed my neck, and I felt her warm breath.

"Ohhh babbbyyy..." I said softly. "Don't let your mouth make promises your body can't keep."

The swelling in her lips had gone down, thankfully, so she didn't have such a 'trout' pout. She had scheduled the breast reduction surgery, and I had given her a new hairstyle — it was now a honey blond shag quite close to her original color. She toned down in the makeup and clothes styles also and was gradually back on track for a more 'natural' beauty.

Regardless, we were together, we were happy, we were in love. I held her in my arms, and she kissed my neck some more, gradually going down until she got to my breasts. She took one in her mouth, chewing softly, then blew

on it and I felt it grow turgid and rigid. Then she bit down on it, a bit hard and I gasped.

“Careful, doll!” I said, moaning. A warmth grew in my middle and I got very wet. She continued downward, tongue flickering lightly over my clitoris, before plunging in deep. I couldn’t help but rock my body in time to her exquisite tongue, panting and moaning as she made me so hot.

She reached up and gripped one of my nipples when I got to the panting phase, then she twisted it hard and I screamed, gushing into her mouth, shivering and quaking as my first female orgasm flooded through me.

She surfaced, wearing a wide grin, and I kissed her mouth.

“How did that feel?” she said.

“Oh my God, so amazing!” I was still shivering as my toes curled.

I ran my hands through her hair, kissing her, and going down on her body also. Her lovely pussy still tasted as delectable as it always had and I brought her to orgasm. She screamed, riding my face, shivering in ecstasy.

Then she moved her legs between mine. “There’s something I’ve always wanted to try,” she said as she moved down the bed, keeping her legs between mine. “Open your legs darling...”

I did, and she pressed her wet box to mine and began to grind. I moaned, grinding back against her, scissoring my legs and pivoting my hips. We were able to get a delicious suction going as we ground against each other. I came several times and I know she did as well.

Later we smoked on top of the covers. She lay in my arms, her head on my breast.

“I don’t remember if we ever were able to cum that much when we were man and wife,” she said.

“Hell, no,” I said. “The most I think for me was three times.”

She smiled. "Well, at least we know we can make each other happy."

"Sexy girl," I said, kissing her mouth.

"Mmm, sexy mama!"

I rolled my eyes. "Mama's gonna spank you if you keep calling me that."

"Have I been a bad girl, Mama?" she said, in a cute high-pitched voice.

"Very bad, I'm afraid." I ran my hand over her backside and gave her a sharp slap.

"Ohhh!" she cried.

I slapped her again, harder this time.

"Ohhhh!" she said again.

Karyn liked a little bondage. I slid her over my knee and gave her a few spankings, then worked on her breasts, massaging and twisting the nipples until she was shaking and screaming in pain and ecstasy.

She got very sleepy after that and I cuddled with her.

"Next time, can I try a hood?"

"Whatever you think might heighten your enjoyment."

She nodded and fell asleep.

I looked at the time. Nearly 4 AM. Sighing, I realized I only had an hour before I needed to get up. It took me a long time to get ready in the mornings.

I drifted to sleep feeling her warm naked body, next to mine.

The next morning I arrived at Lord Mallory Inc early. I liked to get a jump on the day, when I wasn't completely exhausted, and answer emails, check phone messages, and make a schedule for what I wanted to get accomplished.

I also found a need to make a pot of coffee, bring pastries, and I'd even brought fresh cut flowers once a week to liven the place up a bit. Some of Joyce's personality was definitely starting to 'bleed through' and I found myself surfing the web during downtimes looking at interior decorating tips, latest hair fashion, and Pictertest color palettes.

The work was tedious but boring. How could I have enjoyed this insurance stuff when I'd been Robert? LMI was embarking on a new project called '*Ambition*' and I was assigned the task of finding out the ins and outs of the competing insurance policies. I was up to my eyeballs in terms and conditions, spreadsheets with amortization tables, questionnaires regarding the project and potential impact, and a hundred more details. I didn't even know what the project was about, much less able to guesstimate what umbrella policy the company might adopt.

My executive assistant was a gal named Monica who was down with all the latest gossip in the company. She was cute with blond hair, blue eyes, and a full-figured form that kept her running in the tighter circles, unlike me who had come in as the old battle-ax.

"SLT meeting in 10," Stephen Fisher said, popping into my office. He was a good-looking guy, in his late fifties, and was the head of HR.

I glanced at my calendar. "Guess they don't use email to schedule meetings?"

"You know the boss," Stephen said. "Hey, want to grab some coffee later?"

"Sure," I said.

"Meet me downstairs after the meeting. I need a pick-me-up." He gave a dashing grin.

"It's a date."

Stephen smiled, knocking on my door-frame then darted away.

I finished the email I'd been typing and sent it off. After clearing my virtual and physical desktop of current items, I grabbed my purse and threw my tablet in it. After visiting the ladies' room, I went into the conference room.

The teleconference screen had been set up and we could see the interior of the London office. I did some rough calculus in my head and figured it was around 3:00 pm in the UK.

Senior leadership from both countries found a seat and chatted softly. Stephen Fisher sat next to me, which I liked and didn't like at the same time.

Exmuritious moved into camera range and sat at the 'head' of the table in the UK.

"Welcome everyone, and thank you for coming at such short notice. I wanted to announce, officially that project *Ambition* is officially launched and construction had commenced at the new facility in Abu Dhabi."

Eyebrows raised as several people started side conversations at once.

"I know, we are escalating our time schedule, but I think it's important to understand our deadline is quickly approaching. I want our first event to happen at midnight on December 21st which gives us a little over 7 months to have it built, tested, and QA'd."

Again, the table erupted in conversation, most of it angry over the timeline. I stayed quiet, mainly because I had no idea what Project *Ambition* actually was.

"How can we be expected to have our first event on December 22?" Gabriel Iku said. He was our Team Captain for the US office. "We have six

monthly events between then and now, and that has been taking almost all of our resources as it is.”

Exmuritious nodded. “The gala events are suspended until further notice.”

“Wait, what?” I said. This was disastrous news, I was very much on track to get my body back!

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who was upset by this. The entire meeting erupted into exclamations and angry voices. Stephen was furious, his face flushed a deep red as he shouted into the conferencing monitor.

Exmuritious waited for the fury to die down, making placating motions with his hands. “I know, I know, believe me, I know what this means for many of you. But we can’t split our focus, we simply must devote all of our time to *Ambition* in order for it to be a success. Once that is in the bag, we can get back to the monthly events, I promise.

Several people muttered under their breath but fell silent after a short time.

“Ms. Reagan, what progress have you made with the selection committee, are we prepared to choose a product?”

Startled, I cleared my throat. “I have the proposals prepared and completed my analysis, yes.”

“Perfect. That’s the first domino that must fall in order for all of this to happen. Get with the selection committee today and let’s get that out of the way so we can get on with our important work, shall we?”

“Of course,” I said, sitting down.

He went around the room, querying the various members of the Senior Leadership Team for their contribution to the overall project. He had hired

competent staff, so the project appeared to be on time and under budget, which is what everyone wants in these types of endeavors.

“Everyone know next steps?” He said, standing up.

We all mumbled our agreement.

“Perfect.” He took a few steps toward the doorway in London. “I expect all of you to fulfill your objectives as stated in your employment contracts. I’d hate to have to ‘demote’ any of you, but the success of the project depends on everyone’s one-hundred-percent dedication. I hope I’m being very clear”

“Perfectly, Ex,” Gabriel Iku, said looking back at us. “Right team?”

“Yah, boss.” Most of us chorused as we too stood up and started to leave.

Stephen Fisher glanced at me on the way out of the room. “Forget coffee, let’s go have a drink!”

I nodded, still stunned at the news.

I would be stuck as Joyce for the next seven months.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Stephen Fisher was well on his way to drunk when I found my way to his table. It had taken me a little while to email the insurance packages over to Ex, use the ladies' room and find my way to the corner establishment through the busy New York Streets.

I sat down, exhaling, laying my purse on my lap.

“Glad you made it!” Stephen said, waving to the waitress who took my order and disappeared.

“Yeah, I had a few things to clean up after the meeting.”

“I bet!” He said, downing another shot, and ordering another.

“Not sure I should be drinking this early.”

“After that meeting, I’m surprised more aren’t down here. They’re probably afraid they’ll get fired, but what the fuck do I care?”

“Not afraid of getting fired?”

He took a smaller sip. “Nope. They got me right where they want me. I’m fucked, Joyce.”

I nodded, taking a long pull on my gin and tonic. It loosened me up in all the right places, and I felt the need to smoke. I pulled out a cigarette and he lit it for me.”

“How do you mean?” I said.

He shrugged. “I was a thirty-year old flight attendant. Someone spotted me, and drugged me. When I woke up I was an eighty-year old man working on a ranch in Montana.”

“You were a woman before?” I exhaled smoke away from his face. I hadn’t actually known there were other people in my situation working for Lord Mallory.

He nodded. “Worked my way through the system and got stuffed into Steve. They must like my work because I’ve been here six years now. I finally had enough to bid on an Experience and whadotheydo?”

He was starting to run his words together. “Suspended until further notice?”

“Zactly,” he said. “Hey, get another martini.” He waved at the waitress over my objection.

“Was gonna be perfect too. I had my eye on an auction...fuck!”

“Well, maybe you can still get into it after Ambition is complete?”

He shook his head. “No, Ambition is gonna change the game, sweetheart.”

“How so?”

He took a sip. “Just is. You know about the project?”

“No, no one has told me exactly what it is yet.”

He nodded. “It’s sssupper sssecret.” He put a finger to his lips as his s’s slosed together. He closed his eyes a bit. “Sssecret.”

“I just sent a billion-dollar umbrella policy to cover the liability. It would be nice to know what I just covered.”

He nodded, putting his arm on my shoulder. “I could tell ya...but...then I’d have to kill ya!”

I rolled my eyes. This was going nowhere. I needed to get to the salon anyway, a few hours early would allow me to run another induction and hopefully make me a better stylist.

He leaned in close, and I could smell the booze. “You know, you’re kinda hot for a broad your age.”

I smiled, raising my hand to the waitress and making the signing motion for the check.

“I like the way you dress. I’d like the way you undress too.”

“Think that’s enough for you, bucko,” I said, standing up.

“Nonono no. Don’t leave. We haven’t got to the good part yet.”

“And what’s that?”

He leaned in close, whispering in my ear. “The part where I slide my cock between those giant titties of yours and cum on your face.”

I slapped him. “Fuck off!”

He laughed. “Aww, come on! It’ll be fun, and I’ll tell you about Ambition!” He started pawing at my chest, and I tried to pull away from him.

“Do you need assistance?” I male voice said from behind us.

I was able to extricate myself from Stephen’s boozy embrace. “No, I was just leaving.”

“Come on!” Stephen said. “You know you want it!”

I leaned over and whispered, spearing his toe with my two inch heel. “If I wanted a tiny cock like yours, I could find a better man to give it to me!”

“Ow!” He tried to pull away, and fell back into the divider behind us. He tumbled ass-over-teakettle and his toupee slid sideways. “You bitch!”

I huffed and picked up my purse, as the bartender tried to help Stephen to his feet. I quickly walked away, trembling.

Outside, I lit another cigarette and blew the smoke away. Joyce was a tough bitch, I knew it from her induction series, but that had been scary. He’d held me, and twisted my arm. I rubbed the area and knew I’d have a bruise.

I caught the subway to Queens and went into the salon. “Joyce!” Sue said from behind the register. “You’re early! How are you feeling, hon.”

“I’m okay, thanks.”

“Are you wanting to take on a few before your shift? I can give you...”

“No, I’m going to lie down in the break-room if that’s okay. Headache.”

“Of course, honey. There’s some ibuprofen in the cabinet.”

“Thanks, doll.”

Still shaking, I went to the medicine cabinet and took out some pain reliever. I poured a glass of water and swallowed them, closing my eyes after and feeling the cool water slide down my throat.

I was still trembling from the encounter with Stephen. How could I continue to work after what he’d done? He’d twisted my arm! Fucker. And I had to work with the guy, how was I even going to look at him again? And he was HR! Jesus, he could have me fired, relocated, or worse!

Unable to sleep, I got up and started toying with the wigs. Billie had an entire wall full of wigs and the girls and I would style them and resell them. I took one down and started back brushing.

Ambition. I really wondered what it was about. I knew it was in Abu-Dabi and nearly half of Lord Mallory operating funds went into its

construction. It obviously had something to do with Transmigration, but what exactly?

After getting the hair into a nice 'helmet' I started curling the ends near the neck. I had an older sixties bouffant in mind...

Stephen would have told me if I'd allowed him to paw me. I sighed. I did want to know, but I didn't want to be sexually harassed in order to learn it.

I finished the wig, spraying multiple layers of hairspray and fixit in order for it to stay in its perfect coif. I glanced up into the mirror and fixed my own hair a bit, and touched up Joyce's makeup.

I put on my smock, fluffed my hair, and went out into the salon. Sue and Darlene were working and there were a handful of clients sitting in the waiting area. I went to the Point of Sale tablet on the front counter and looked for the next client.

"Mrs. Hennington?" I said. An older woman waved her hand and stood up. Her hair was shapeless gray and had dozens of split ends. She wanted a cut and set.

"How's Randy?" the woman said. "Are you two back together?" She had a heavy New York accent - 'Togetha'

"Naw," I said. "He still shakin' up with his whore secretary," I said. "Lean back, Delores, let me do ya wash."

She leaned back and I turned on the water and let it warm up. I knew how to do this like I knew how to ride a bike or drive a car. Muscle memory from doing it over and over and over.

Or that's what my body knew anyway. Robbie Adamson faded a bit more each day I wore Joyce Reagan's body. I wondered how long before I was really Joyce and no longer Robbie?

I washed her hair, then used hot oil deep conditioning treatment, rolled her hair, and set her under a hairdryer. While she baked, I picked up a magazine and lit a cigarette flipping through the pages, looking for coupons.

It was easy to slide into this, easy to not think, and just let Joyce take over. Easy not to think about Lord Mallory, the insurance portfolios, Exmuritious, Stephen Fisher, and all of it. When I started slipping like this I kept Karyn's face in my mind, her smile, the way her eyes crinkled when she laughed, and I'd be back, back to being me.

The egg-timer chimed, and I went back to Delores and brushed out her hair, set it with spray, and went on to the next customer.

Later that evening I made it home to our executive apartment. Karyn met me at the door with a kiss and a smile.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

“Hi, Darling!” Karyn met me at the door with a kiss and a hug. “Eww, you smell like hair salon.”

I sighed and kicked off my heels, dropping off my purse on the stand, and pulling off the clip-on earrings I’d worn for the day. I glanced into the hall mirror and fluffed my hair a little.

“Yeah, I got a glob of lightener on my blouse.” I rubbed at my sleeve where I knew it would leave a mark.

“Ah, the travails of being a hairdresser,” Karyn said, giggling as she nudged me. “I have dinner ready.”

“Perfect, let me use the bathroom and I’ll be right out!”

She smiled and went into the well-equipped kitchen.

Everything about the apartment screamed ‘success’ and ‘money,’ from the mahogany furnishings to the towering windows that looked over the skyline of Manhattan. The place was richly furnished, well-equipped and sterile as hell. Not one photograph of a family member, nothing out of

place, no hobby side-projects, no bag of salt at the doorway for the stoop...it felt very remote and unreal.

I went into the bathroom and did my business, then washed my hands thoroughly in a glass bowl of twin his and hers sinks. Well, maybe hers and hers, given the situation.

I sighed. Seven more months? Would I still be 'me' at the end of that term?

Walking out into the dining area, Karyn had set a lovely candlelit dinner. Fresh scallops set off perfectly prepared salmon steaks with a salad and white wine.

"Wow, what's the occasion?" I said.

She slid into my arms, handing me a wine glass. "Do I need an occasion to treat the love of my life?"

I felt tears brimming in my eyes a little. Could I have been as loving as she were in the old man's body? "You are too good for me."

She laughed. "I'm too good for you? Who basically gave up their entire gender, 30 years of their life, sold every asset--all to rescue me?"

I kissed her softly as I sipped a little wine. "I'd do it again."

"I know you would." She kissed me, her tongue darting into my mouth softly. "Which is why I made us a lovely meal."

She escorted me to my seat and pulled out my chair. "Hey, I'm supposed..."

"Shh...darling." She pressed down on my shoulder and I sat down. She went to her chair and held up her wine glass.

"Bon-appetit, my darling."

I clinked her glass with mine and we tucked in.

Later, as we snuggled on the couch watching a rom-com, I nuzzled her neck.

“Oh, by the way,” I said. “Sounds like the transmigration events are on hold until the new project is completed.”

She turned to me, alarm on her face. “What? How can they do that?”

I shrugged. “Apparently, it’s all hands on deck for the Abu Dhabi site. All events are canceled in the interim.”

“What about your body?”

I shrugged. “I’m sure it’ll be kept on ice, or something.”

“Seven months, Robbie! Whoever is in there could do anything to it!”

I nodded. “Stephen Fisher was going to tell me what the secret event is all about but...”

“But what?”

“He got a little sexual harrasmenty.”

“Oh, my god, Robbie! Are you okay?”

I nodded. “Nothing I can’t handle, but it was disturbing and not pleasant.”

“Did you tell somebody?”

I shook my head.

“Baby, if this had happened to me, what would you do?”

I nodded. “I get it.”

“You would tell me to call the police! Go to HR! And if I didn’t you would do it yourself!”

“Yeah, but...”

“Robbie, if you don’t tell someone he’ll keep doing it to others. You have to report it!”

“Look, I love you for wanting to take action on this, and use it as an object lesson regarding my new...situation, but I’ll handle it in my own time in my own way, okay?”

She sighed, the danger in her eye starting to fade. “Alright, but you have to promise me you’ll take some kind of action.”

“I promise.”

She nodded, then pulled my arm around her shoulders again. “Anyway, so another seven months. Does this mean your swap cycle is on hold too?”

“I believe so. Not sure on that.”

“Well, you better check. Otherwise, in about ten days you’re going to be in a different body again.”

I nodded. All things considered that might not be a bad thing. I was finding it harder and harder to keep my mind on issues at Lord Mallory Inc, and easier to slip into the hairdresser from Queens.

“I have to find out what the secret project is.” I hugged Karyn to me tightly.

“Baby, if you’re not supposed to know...”

“I know, but what if they’re going to be stealing more bodies? Do we really want to be responsible for more people being in this situation?”

She nodded, biting her lip. “How can you find out?”

“Well, up until Stephen decided to paw me, he was going to tell me.”

“If Stephen knows, maybe the answer is in his office somewhere?”

I smiled. “True.”

“Perhaps you could put those old hacking skills to the test and see if you can get into his computer?”

“Everything has changed now...but...”

I had a certain program that allowed me to reset a user password to blank if I ran it at startup. I'd need access to his computer for a few minutes without being seen...

"Let's go." Karyn bounded up off the couch.

"Where?"

She rolled her eyes at me. "You're dying to know, and you know where the information is located. We go into your office, and I'll be lookout for you as you hack into Stephen's computer."

"I don't know that we should..."

"I know you're in an old woman's body, Robbie, but that doesn't mean you have her soul. Stop being chicken and let's go find out!"

"Ya know, I kinda resent you using classist and elitist language like that."

"Ooh, shush, lady." She got up off the couch and held out her hand to me. "Are you coming?"

I sighed and allowed her to pull me up off the couch. "How does one dress when one performs B and E?"

"Just put on that black pullover and leggings."

"You're serious!"

"Of course, I'm serious, Robbie. Come on now, get a move on!"

I sighed and followed her into the bedroom.

I had a very bad feeling about all of this.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

I felt like an intruder at the offices of Lord Mallory, even though I'd put in some very late night before. This was a different situation, we were on a nefarious mission to do nefarious things against nefarious people.

"Do you feel nefarious?" I whispered, as the elevator dinged and we stepped into the lobby of LMI.

"Totally," Karyn whispered back. We both wore dark pullover shirts and black leggings, though she looked far more fetching in hers than I did in mine.

"So how do we do this?" I said, using my prox-key to open the door to the back offices where Stephen Fisher and I both had our workspaces.

"I don't know!" Karyn said. "You're the ex-hacker."

"Yes, but that was back in Visual Basic days!" I whispered back.

"Why are we whispering?" Karyn said.

"Because they have surveillance cameras on all areas?" I said.

“Won’t the fact we’re dressed all in black and whispering alert them to our nefarious activities?”

I sighed. “Jesus, just stay here. Call me on your mobile and use your earpiece. We’ll stay in constant contact through the mobile call.”

“Can’t they trace that?”

I shrugged, “Probably.”

She called my phone and I answered, putting the earbud in my ear. “If the elevator starts moving let me know,” I said.

“Over!” she replied.

“You’re supposed to say ‘Roger.’”

“But your name is Robbie!”

I sighed. “I think we might be the worst criminals in history.”

I made my way through the hall and down to my office. Just another gal needing to put in a late night at the office. I opened my door, then went to my workstation and logged into the network.

I knew they had virtual safeguards in place as well as physical, so I couldn’t just ‘hack the network.’ I needed physical access to his workstation in order to run my little cracker program. Problem was, our prox keys weren’t keyed to each other’s offices and there would be an indelible virtual record of what we were doing.

I looked up at the ceiling and realized it was just ceiling tile. If this body had been 20 years younger, I might have been able to slip through the crawlspace above the tile, and into Stephen’s office next door but those days were long behind old Joyce.

Logging onto the network, I checked my email. Nothing too unusual, we were reviewing current policies, looking for upcoming trends, assessing blanket renewals in favor of targeted...

I saw an email from Stephen. I clicked on it.

From: <Stephen Fisher, sfisher@lmi.net>

To: <Joyce Reagan, jreagan@lmi.net>

Subject: Please see Enclosed.

Attachment: 1 DZ_9384.png

Joyce,

Your attention is needed on an important matter. Please click the link attached and process in accordance with company policy. If you have any questions or wish to pursue this matter further, please see me in my office.

W/r

SFisher.

I clicked on the Attachment. A man's penis was flagrantly displayed at full mast. It had gray matted pubic hair and I could tell it was from Stephen's office by the pictures on the wall of his wife and kids.

"Bastard." I said.

"What?" Karyn responded. I'd forgotten about the earpiece.

"Stephen sent me a dick pic."

She giggled. "Your first!"

At one point, Karyn had received over 100 dick pics to her public email address tied to her social media accounts. I'm not exactly sure what possesses men to send pictures of their genitalia at random to women, but it's a sickness with no apparent cure. We always flagged them as inappropriate but they never stopped flowing into her inbox.

"So?" Karyn said, in a soft voice.

"What?"

“Well, how does it look?”

“Jesus, Karyn, like a cock! How do you think it looks?”

“Well, is it all wrinkly and small or is it...”

“I think he might have taken a blue pill.”

She giggled again. “Aww, he loves you!”

I hit the reply button, then with a second thought, I clicked on ‘blind carbon copy’ and selected the ‘all staff’ group.

From: <Joyce Reagan, jreagan@lmi.net>

To: <Stephen Fisher, sfisher@lmi.net>

BCC: <All Staff, allstaff@lmi.net>

Subject: Please see Enclosed.

Attachment: 1 DZ_9384.png

Mr. Fisher,

I find the enclosed document to be lacking in many ways in both form and function. Please seek out professional assistance for further consultation on the matter.

Joyce

I clicked ‘include attachment’ and hit the send button.

“What are you doing, I can hear your nails typing.”

“I replied and broadcast it to the entire company.”

She screamed. “You didn’t!”

“Shhh, woman. You’re going to get us caught!”

I was angry. With righteous indignation, I pulled up a telnet session and opened a command prompt. I knew more than I let on to Exmuritious about virtual systems. There’s always an underlying language to the top layer of

applications used by a company. If you know the ins and outs of the language the machines speak, you can do just about anything.

I ran a scan against the system security server, and found several open ports. They'd be encrypted, of course, for specific applications tied to those ports. After running a packet capture, I was able to classify the application and discover the network protocols they used. I was then able to create a remote shell utilizing the same packet structure as the sending program, and I attached the cryptographic hash from the last sent packet.

Bingo, I was in. Launching the remote shell, I was able to access the building management software, and found the proximity lock sub-tabs. I associated Stephen's office location with my proximity lock, then got up and went out into the hallway.

"Any movement on the elevator?" I said.

"Nothing!" Karyn whispered back.

I used my prox lock on Stephen's door, and it opened silently.

Ugh, I could see the chair he'd sent the dick pic from and forced myself to sit down at his workstation. Getting into his computer would be tricky; Lord Mallory had a strict three strikes and you're locked out password policy. He'd told me the name of his kids, his wife, his dogs...but I didn't have time...

I looked over his desk, and opened one of his drawers. On a post-it note, was a 15 character phrase: D@ddyWantsMilk!

"Jesus Christ."

"What?" Karyn said in an urgent whisper.

I entered the phrase into his computer and his desktop sprang to life. "He had his password in his fucking desk drawer."

She giggled again. "This is fun!"

I scrolled through his files and folders. After inserting my drive into the proper slot, I quickly copied anything that might have to do with the project. Luckily, he was an organized person so it wasn't difficult to find by the keyword; Ambition. After a few minutes, I had everything I thought we could use, and I shut down his workstation, but not before I heard a ping from his email.

From: Exmuritious Forrester CEO Lord Mallory Inc

To: sfisher@lmi.inc

Subject: Re: Please see enclosed

Come to my office.

X

After that there were what looked to be dozens of replies to my response. I gave a small grin, then quickly darted out the door. After turning the lights off in my office, I found Karyn in the front foyer.

“Well?” she said.

“Mission accomplished!” I said, holding up the drive. The elevator dinged right behind me and the door opened.

Karyn and I both looked at each other, alarm on our faces. Exmuritious Forrester stepped out of the elevator.

“Well, well, well, Ms. Reagan. You've been a busy girl tonight, haven't you?” he reached out and plucked the drive from my hand.

I slumped as he walked past us. “Follow me, please.”

I considered making a run for it, but he had a security detail with him. Karyn looked at me, her eyes wide and I could tell she was worried.

I shrugged and we followed him into the offices.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“You know, you’ve proven to be quite the adversary, Robert.” Exmuritious sat in his overstuffed office chair regarding us from behind a desk that had the same square footage as the state of Texas.

“As you’ve so carefully crafted, I am no longer Robert.” I tried to sound confident, but my voice had that ‘old woman shake’ I hated so much.

“I can guess you’re after the origins and meanings of *Ambition*, am I right?”

I nodded, brushing invisible lint off my leggings. “Yes.”

“Why didn’t you just ask?”

“Like you would have told me? You would have stated,” I tried to do my best Exmuritious inflection. ‘If you were meant to have such information you would possess it,’ or something.” I tried to do my best Exmuritious inflection.

He gave a slight shrug and a nod and handed the drive to an associate wearing sunglasses who stepped out of the office and probably into a

parallel universe or something.

“Well, since you’re not in any position to cause any danger to the Project, I can tell you.” He turned on his computer and triggered the overhead projection screen so we could all see it.

“Abu-Dhabi. Actually, the desert outside of the city itself. You see we needed a large amount of sand in order to achieve optimal results.”

He directed an overhead satellite image, then scaled in several times so we could see from above what had been erected.

It was an immense pyramid-shaped outline with a hanging stylus. Much like the much smaller version I’d seen at Transmigration studios when they had switched my body.

“Jesus,” Karyn said. “You’re going to really have some kind of mass event? That pyramid could hold hundreds of people!”

“One-thousand two hundred and thirty-seven, to be exact,” Exmuritious said.

“You’re really going to swap the souls of one-thousand two hundred and thirty seven people?” I said. “Won’t that cause a bit of chaos?”

Exmuritious grinned. “It’s not so much the chaos, as to the destination. You see, we’re not just swapping a bunch of people into another bunch of people. We’re going to be placing all of those souls into one individual who will stand on the dais.”

“Wait, what?” I said. “Why would you—“

“Think of it, Robert,” Exmuritious said, standing up and starting to pace. “All those life experiences. All those memories, all those personalities, all focused on one single person. Think of the amount of knowledge they could gain, life experience, skills—“ he spoke with such passion and animation it was hard not to feel excited.

“Scientists, musicians, prodigies from all fields of study. Engineers, Philosophers, poets, businessmen, and financial geniuses. All focused into one mind, one body, with many souls.”

He touched his chest reverently.

“You,” Karyn said. “You’re going to be standing on the dais, aren’t you.”

He grinned a tiger’s smile. “Indeed!”

I swallowed. “Why?”

He looked at me, confused like I had asked the one question no one had considered. “Well, why not?”

“Don’t you think that if we were meant to have access to multiple lifetimes’ worth of knowledge and memories, God, the Creator, or *whoever* is up there would have allowed that?”

“Who says they didn’t?” Exmuritious sat back down. “Who says they didn’t provide this very process in order for us to achieve that very thing!”

Well, he had a good point at that.

“Who says you won’t come out the other side not as the most enlightened individual,” I pressed. “You’ll also be migrating those peoples’ neurosis, psychologies, faults, and flaws. You could very well become a monster.”

He shrugged. “Our projections show a small chance of that, true. But also an overwhelming chance of complete success! I’ve always been success-focused, not limitation-focused, as you well know by now.”

I ground my teeth. “And are the...how many was it?”

Karyn answered me. “One-Thousand Two Hundred and Thirty-Seven.”

“Yes, One-thousand two hundred and thirty-seven people. All those scientists, mathematicians, musicians, artists, and entrepreneurs. Are they all volunteering for this mass transmigration?” I tapped my nail on the desk. “Or are you doing like you did Karyn? *Stealing their bodies.*”

He shrugged. “No, they are unaware of what we are attempting to accomplish. They think this is a musical event by a popular rock-and-roll band.”

I crossed my arms under Joyce’s breasts. “That’s what I thought.”

He smiled. “Which leads us to next steps.”

Karyn gripped my arm, a little painfully. Joyce had tender flesh.

“Obviously, your intentions regarding this process are well documented. You feel Ms. Adamson’s body was taken against her will—“

“Which is absolutely true!” I said.

“Regardless, we can’t have you being a loose cannon so to speak.”

He sighed, glancing down at his tablet.

I swallowed, and put my hand over Karyn’s.

“Which is a pity, because you were doing good work, both at the Salon, and here at LMI. You’ve really become a valued member of the team, Joyce.”

He signaled for two of the assistants to restrain us.

“I thought we had enough leverage over you with the risk to your permanent status within your old body, but I realize now we were mistaken.”

“No!” I said as they peeled Karyn’s hands away from me. “You weren’t! I won’t say anything.”

Exmuritious shook his head. “I can’t trust that to be true, Robert.”

“Please, just take me, and leave Karyn out of this?”

He shook his head again. “She is as much a danger as you are.” He got up and turned off his tablet. “Take them down into holding cell B8 until I can decide what to do with them.”

Strong hands bound us with energy cuffs behind our back. I looked at Karyn. "I'm sorry!"

She gave a small smile. "Wouldn't have missed this for the world!"

We huddled together in the small metallic cell in the basement of the building. I'd inspected the walls, it was hermetically sealed from everything I could see. No seams in the stainless steel walls, just a single door, bunk bed, commode, and small sink with a meager flow of water. We took turns washing and drinking a bit of water from cupped palms.

After awhile I stretched out on the top bunk and Karyn slept on the bottom bunk. It was impossible to tell the time, the only light emanated from the small glass square in the door.

As far as I could tell, we were the only ones down here. We'd shouted a bit to see if anyone else answered, and unless the cell was also soundproof, we were isolated.

"At least we're together," Karyn said, the next morning? Afternoon? It had been at least 24 hours, or so I thought. We'd been given three meals through a slot in the bottom of the door.

Calling them meals was a kindness. All three consisted of twin bowls with a gray paste dropped in that tasted vaguely like beef bullion. We ate it, washing it down with handfuls of water.

"True," I said and gathered her in my arms on the lower bunk.

"What do you think they'll do to us?"

I shrugged. "Well, if they were planning to kill us, I think they would have already.

She nodded.

"They could just keep us here until after Ambition."

“I suppose that’s true,” Karyn said. “Jesus, I’m sorry, Robbie.”

“Sorry for what? This certainly isn’t your fault.”

She started to cry. “Of course it is! If I’d just listened to you at the very beginning, I never would have gone on that trip in the first place!”

“Um, honey—“ I hugged her tight. “I hate to tell you this, but I never told you not to go. In fact, I encouraged you to go because it all sounded legitimate.”

“Maybe so, but in my mind, you were telling me ‘if something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.’ “ She imitated me speaking.

“That’s a terrible impression of me.”

“Says you.” She smiled. “I nailed it.”

“It does sound like something I would have said.”

“Something you have said.” Karyn squeezed my fingers. “And if I’d listened to you, even if it was imaginary you, we wouldn’t be in this mess and at least you’d still have—“

Her voice cracked.

“*You’d at least still have your body!*” she started to cry.

I shushed her, rocking back and forth. “Shhh, honey, no sense crying over what was. We have to focus on the now, and the future.”

She nodded, wiping tears from her eyes.

We sat, huddled on the bunk in each others’ arms for awhile.

“Got any ideas?” she said, after a time.

I sighed. “Nothing coming to mind.”

She nodded, huddled into me, and before long, I heard her soft snores.

The time in the cell was agony on my back and joints as Joyce’s arthritis flared up. I stretched, extricating myself from Karyn’s arms, laid her down gently on the lower bunk, and laid the thin cotton sheet over her.

I went to the window and peered out into the deserted hallway. A light flickered in the distance, and I had no idea of the scale or size of the basement.

It looked like we would be down here a long time. I needed a cigarette badly and craved a decent meal even more. What would they do?

I tried to place myself in Exmuritious's shoes and came up with two options: Death or Transference into a body that could not expose them. Either way, our options were dwindling.

We were well and truly fucked.

*The end of book two**

Metempsychosis Apotheosis Continues with Book three available August First 2022

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CHAPTER TWENTY-one

Being held in a prison cell sucks, even when you're with the love of your life. It's cramped, uncomfortable, nowhere to sit comfortably, nothing to look at, nowhere to go, nothing to do. We chatted, sang songs, played puzzle games, braided each others' hair, and generally tried to keep from going stir crazy.

Karyn's monthlies came and went several times during our incarceration. So we knew months had passed. Both of us were irritable (read *bitchy*) and I'd been through nicotine withdrawal on top of it.

Karyn had us doing yoga in the mornings, followed by meditation sessions where we took turns humming deep pacifying tones. We told each other stories, talked about our childhoods, played 'never have I ever', and challenged each other to math puzzles.

Sometimes these escalated into screaming matches.

After one such fight, we retreated into our own special spaces. Karyn had the left side of the cell, and I had the right and we sat facing the metal wall,

arms folded, both of us in tears.

She came to me shortly after, putting her arms around me from behind.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

Fuming, I turned my head. “But you were wrong.”

I felt her cringe a little, but she nodded. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It *does* matter, you have to admit you were wrong.”

She inhaled. “I was wrong.”

I nodded, still facing the stainless wall, arms crossed. I wasn’t ready to forgive her yet.

“Ugh, this is excruciating. When do you think they’ll let us out?”

“How many times have you had your period?”

She shrugged. “Four, I think? But I missed at least one, that I know. This fucking diet.”

I nodded. “So we must be close to the date of Ambition.”

“You think they’ll let us out after it?”

“They can’t keep us here forever.”

“I suppose not...”

We heard a lock open, and the door swung open.

Stunned, I shielded my eyes from the harsh light that entered. We occasionally had people come in — once, I got sick from something in the sludge they fed us and they gave me anti-biotics. Another time, they fixed the toilet that had clogged. They also occasionally brought us new nylon jumpsuits to wear after they became so smelly and ragged.

I recognized the figure in the doorway. “Stephen?”

He nodded. “Come, I’m getting you two out of here.”

“What?” We both got to our feet.

“Don’t ask questions, this has taken me quite a long time to setup. Can you walk?”

I nodded, then almost promptly fell back down on my ass. We’d been doing a bit of cardio to stay in shape, but it was still quite a shock to see someone and to know we hadn’t been completely forgotten.

“Come, we have to hurry. This window only lasts a very short time.”

He helped us out into the hallway, and we got into an elevator. Inside he had a rolling cart, and he pulled back the lid. “Get in.”

We both nodded, and I got into the cart first, followed by Karyn. My old bones did not want to fold in the manner they needed to, so it took a few moments for me to bend my neck enough so he could replace the lid. The cart was stuffy and hot, and I heard some kind of rustling as Stephen disguised the cart as whatever.

We went up a couple of levels, and the elevator door opened. I felt the cart rolling out of the elevator, and a short time later, the front of the cart opened a different door.

“You’ll have to crawl through!” he whispered urgently. Karyn crawled, and I followed, though it felt like kneeling on glass with my bad left knee. Karyn dragged me into a vehicle and the door was shut.

Stephen opened the passenger side and ‘unloaded’ whatever else he’d set on top of the cart. A short time later, he was speeding away through the parking garage.

“Stay down until I give the signal!” he said.

I was in pain. My back was twisted, my knee was excruciating, and somehow I’d managed to stub my toe getting into the cart barefoot. He drove quickly through the garage and pulled up to the security checkpoint. So far so good.

A klaxon went up in the garage, and Stephen said: “Fuck fuck fuck fuck!” softly.

“Uh, Sir, we’re going to need you to park your vehicle on the left here. Apparently, there’s been some kind of security breach and we’ll need to inspect it.”

I sighed, looking down at Karyn. Her eyes were wide, and we were both trembling with terror and excitement.

“I’m late for an extremely important appointment,” Stephen said. “Look, as you can see, I have nothing in my car!”

“Can you please open the hatch, Sir?”

“Randall, is it?” Stephen said.

“Yes, Sir. Randall Simpson.”

“Look Randall, as you can see I’ve been cleaning out my office with a bunch of junk. If I stop to open the back, I’m going to be late for this appointment which could mean millions in revenue to the company. Are you sure you want to be responsible for that?”

“Really, Sir, if you could just—“

“I have to go! Open the gate!”

“Nope,” the guard said. “I need you to park your vehicle and step away —“

With a roar, we bounced forward and felt the shock of impact. At first, the vehicle stopped, and Karyn and I were thrown against the back seat of the vehicle, but then he gunned the engine and I could hear the squeal of tires. I smelled burning rubber, as the car slewed forward again, and with a strange *tearing* sound, we started forward again. He gunned it, and turned hard left, then right throwing us from side to side in the vehicle.

We both yelled a bit at the pain from being dashed against the sides of the car.

“Sorry!” Stephen yelled from the front. “Just hang tight, I’m going to get us out of here!”

We drove for awhile, and briefly, I heard sirens behind us, but after some deft driving maneuvers, Stephen must have left them.

“We need to change cars. I’m pulling up now, and you can get into the back seat of the Lexus.”

He pulled to a stop with a screech, then opened the back hatch. Dazed, but not terribly wounded we both staggered out and into a smaller Lexus SUV.

Stephen headed north, slowing his rate of speed. We all kept checking the rear-view mirrors to see if anyone was following us. Karyn and I ducked every time we came in view of a state Trooper.

After two hours, he pulled over at a convenience store. “There’s clothes for you both in the duffel bag. I’ll wait here and you two can use the restroom to change and get cleaned up.”

“Thank you, Stephen,” I said. We hadn’t talked much during our mad dash out of New York, and I felt awkward considering what I’d done with the pics he had sent.

Karyn and I staggered into the ladies’ rooms. She had a bad bruise on her collarbone from being tossed like a salad in the back of the Cadillac.

“You okay?” she asked me after we both had used the restroom.

“Yeah, Jesus, that was some ride.”

“I know.” She pulled off her nylon jumpsuit and pulled on the jeans that were in her size. The other outfit was a long denim dress that I pulled over my head, flipping my braid out from under the collar.

“What do you think he’ll want in return?” Karyn said.

“Not sure...guess we don’t have much of a choice.”

Karyn looked at me. “We *could* make a run for it, here. Maybe hitch a ride?”

I shrugged. “I think he’ll be okay. Just don’t let him get me alone.”

“Believe me, I won’t,” Karyn said. “From this point on, we are joined at the hip!”

I smiled. “And nice hips those are.”

She giggled, and we went back outside.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Stephen drove us to a small cottage he had rented in New Hampshire. We were all under assumed names: Stephen was now Frank Barnett, Karyn was Jessica Barnett, and I was Madeline Barnett, Stephen's spouse.

I blinked when he gave us our identification information; drivers' license, social security card, even a 'birth certificate' that showed me to be sixty-seven years old.

"Um, Madeline Barnett?" I said.

He blushed, fiercely. "I thought it would be easier to explain since we are only a few years apart, and Karyn could easily be our daughter."

I shivered a bit at this, looking at Karyn. Her brow had narrowed as she looked at her new paperwork, but then shrugged. "It's only for a short time."

"Indeed," I said, taking my own and putting it in my purse.

"After all, we're going to stop *Ambition* from happening in the first place, right?" Karyn said.

Stephen nodded. “That’s why I helped you to escape. There’s a large resistance movement and I thought you both might want to help.”

“Well, we’re definitely in your debt,” I said, softly. “It was miserable down there.”

He put his arm around my shoulders and gave me a soft hug. “Well, I feel responsible for you being down there in the first place. I mean, if I hadn’t —“

“Well, I was trying to get information about Ambition from you, so my intentions were less than honorable as well.”

“Let’s let bygones be bygones. I’ve been off the sauce for six months now, and promise not to send you anymore, ah—“

“Dick pics?” Karyn said in a loud voice.

Stephen and I both jumped at that and laughed. “Yes.”

The cottage looked out on a small brook and had lovely maple and oak trees surrounding it. Secluded, it was set back from the main road a bit and had a lovely blue and white color palette featured throughout. I didn’t see any portraits on the wall of any children, no dog on the front stoop, no cat lazily lounging in the sunlight.

“Did you *just* rent this?” I asked as we entered.

“Well, I rented it a few weeks ago, but this is the first time I’ve actually seen it in person. Do you like it?”

I walked to the back and threw open the curtains for a lovely view of the brook and other cottages lining the opposite bank. “It’s gorgeous!”

He beamed. “I’m really glad you like it.”

I walked into the kitchen and found a teapot, and immediately put the kettle on to boil. Pawing through the refrigerator and cupboards I found them to be well-stocked.

“I had to guess at what you might like,” Stephen said. “So I had a local lady make the kitchen preparation. We can get whatever you might need.”

“It’s perfect,” I smiled. “I’m making some tea, or would you prefer coffee?”

“Not this late,” Stephen said.

“Karyn?”

“I’ll take some tea also.”

Watching the sunset from the expansive window, I put the teakettle on a tray with two cups, some sugar and creamers then brought the tray into the living room.

“So what are our next steps?” Karyn said, after sipping a bit.

I took a sip and closed my eyes. It had been months since my last cup. I savored the warmth and the feeling of the sweetness as it slid down my throat.

“There’s clothing in both of your sizes in the master bedroom,” he said.

“Oh, we don’t have to—“ I started.

“No, I insist. It’s the least I can do.”

I smiled sweetly at him. Perhaps men can learn after all?

“Ambition will take place in three weeks' time. We have a plan in place that is being executed. I’ll introduce you to the other players at the meeting tomorrow night.”

I nodded, sipping my tea.

“Will we be onsite for the event?” Karyn said.

“Do you want to be?”

I looked at Karyn. She shrugged.

“We’re not sure. Maybe when we aren’t so exhausted we can discuss it?”

Stephen nodded. “Why don’t you both head to bed. We can talk tomorrow. I have people watching the cottage, so don’t worry about LMI, if something happens and we need to flee, we’ll wake you up.”

I put my arms around him, hugging him tight. “Thank you so much for all of this.”

“I’m sorry for putting you through it,” he said, and I heard the catch in his voice.

I could practically hear Karyn’s eyes rolling in her head. We made our way to the master bedroom, and I sat down on the bed. It was luxurious with a heavy comforter.

“Oh, Stephen, how can I ever *repay* you for this generosity!” Karyn said, in a breathy high-toned voice after closing the door.

“Shaddup, you.”

“You know he’s gonna be like *Bow-chicka-wow-wow!* The first time he gets you alone, right?”

“Look, it was pretty fucking gallant of him to rescue us, you have to admit.”

Karyn pulled back the comforter and slid in next to me. “He’s going to want to take his mighty steed and plow it through your dark woods.” She slid her hands down my body to my crotch.

“Oh, stop it you.” I giggled and pulled her in tight. I leaned down and kissed her mouth sensually. “You’re the only one I want plunging into my forest.”

“Mmm, good. And don’t you forget it, Lady.”

“I won’t.” We kissed again, snuggling against each other and enjoying the lassitude that was sweeping over us both.

“God, I’m dying for a shower, but so exhausted I don’t want to leave the covers.

“Mmm, me either,” I said.

And as I threaded my fingers through her damaged hair, oblivion intruded.

The next morning, I awoke early and took a long hot shower. You miss the little things when incarcerated, like hot baths, showers, razors, and shampoo. We’d made do as best we could, but the thin stream from the water faucet only worked so well when trying to wash. I felt scummy and my skin had psoriasis from being so long without the sun. My gray roots had grown out, and I needed a hot oil treatment for my hair, but that would come later.

I used the body lotion as a moisturizer and began making a list on ‘Madeline’s smartphone of feminine products we would need in the coming weeks.

Feminine products. I sighed. Robert would never have known where to begin.

Night cream, neck cream, nail care products of all types, hair products of all types, the list was rather prodigious. My bridgework was also a wreck and I’d need to get to a dentist soon, but I put that on a lower priority. I made a list of cosmetics for both of us — by this time, I knew by heart Karyn’s preferences also. Her menses were coming soon, so I put hot pads down as well, along with feminine napkins and other items.

I dressed in a cream blouse with brown slacks and looked at myself in the mirror.

Joyce had definitely seen better days. My skin was blotchy and dry even after the lotion.

My wrinkles had apparently multiplied, I assume, from the months of living on nothing but paste. I had zero muscle tone, and the skin on my arms hung like bat wings.

Sighing, I attempted to comb through my ratty hair, and gave up and pinned it into a messy bun.

Stephen was still sleeping apparently, so I went into the kitchen and put coffee and tea on, then made breakfast. A short time later, Karyn stumbled out blearily and mentioned something about coffee, and I poured her a cup with two sugar cubes.

“How the fuck are you able to function?” she said as I ladled eggs, berries, and bagels onto three plates.

“Oh, I’m a wreck too. I think I may just have to shave my head, this hair is almost beyond saving.

She nodded and kissed me softly before sipping her coffee.

“Well, this is a nice surprise, Stephen said walking into the kitchen and pouring himself a cup of coffee. He wore Tan slack and a button-down business shirt and had obviously showered and shaved. He gave me a kiss on the cheek.

“Good morning to you, too,” I said, handing him a plate.

We sat and ate at the small dining table as Stephen caught us up on the world and local events over the past few months. The world had apparently continued to spin, politics and business were about usual, and there had been no sign of pursuit from his contacts inside of Lord Mallory Inc.

“Did we really get away?” Karyn said after we finished.

Stephen shrugged. “Ex always plays stuff close to the chest. I have a couple of inside informants, but aside from the response to our escape, it appears there isn’t a concerted or coordinated effort to reclaim us.

“He probably figures he can call us ex-disgruntled employees if anyone asks,” I said.

“Oh, he already did that. You left ‘in disgrace’ the day after you sent that email.”

“Oh? How did he explain all that?”

Stephen shrugged. “He had the IT department scrub the message, and paid off anyone who might have seen it before they said anything. After all, when he can steal your actual body, people tend to fall in line rather quickly.”

“I’m surprised he hung onto you, quite frankly,” I said.

Stephen smiled. “Oh, he can’t get rid of me. I’m HR Director...or was. I know where too many bodies are buried.”

“Literally?” Karyn looked at him wide-eyed.

Stephen took a sip of his coffee and nodded.

“I’m surprised he’s not mounting a state-wide BOLO,” I said.

“He probably has, which is why we’re under assumed names. We’ll also have to be careful in town to use our pseudonyms.”

“Speaking of town,” I said, putting down my smartphone. “I’ve made a list of essential items we’ll need.”

“Oh, Mumsie!” Karyn said, pitching her voice in a breathy soprano. “I simply *must* have the new e-phone 18! All my friends have them and I simply must have it or die!”

“Jesus, wept,” I said.

“What, don’t I sound like a petulant teenager?”

“Maybe one from the nineteen fifties,” Stephen said, and we laughed.

“Plus aren’t you twenty-one?”

“But, Mumsie!” Karyn said. “I haven’t had a *chance* to mature not like my *contemporaries!*”

I sighed. “This is going to be painful.”

“You said it.” Stephen grinned.

“Daddy!” Karyn said. “Mumsie is being ever so *mean* to me!”

“Aww, Punkin,” Stephen responded. “We’ll straighten her out.”

I sighed. “Okay, you two. I think we should head into town together.”

“Ooooh, as a *family?*” Karyn squealed.

“Yes, exactly.”

“I’ll get changed!” She giggled and leaped to her feet and ran back into the bedroom.

Stephen looked at me. “I think we’ve created a monster.”

I nodded, and we clinked mugs together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Karyn was as advertised during the short trip to the town. She laughed and called us both ‘Mumsie’ and ‘Daddy’ affecting a neo-European accent. It became so ingrained she carried on with it when we finally returned home that afternoon.

“I think I shall take a nap, Mumsie,” she said, kissing me affectionately on the cheek.

“Want me to join?” I said, holding her hands.

“No, I’m alright. Just super tired.”

I nodded and kissed her softly. It jolted her a little, but then she shook her head like she was remembering something and kissed me back.

“You okay?”

“Yeah, just tired.” She walked back down the hallway into the bedroom.

I sat with Stephen out on the rear deck of the cabin. He’d made some tea, and I poured some and added milk and sugar.

“Beautiful sunset,” he said.

I nodded. "Indeed."

Loud music came from inside the little cottage, and I rolled my eyes. "That girl is going to be the death of me."

Stephen chuckled. "Teenagers."

I shot him a glare.

"Sorry! Sorry. Maybe she's just happy to listen to music again."

The heavy bass beats annoyed something in my soul, grating like nails on a chalkboard. "Be right back," I said.

I walked down the hallway, then opened the door. Karyn was laying on her bed, eyes closed, but moving quietly to the hip-hop blasting from the speakers five feet away.

"Can you turn it down?" I said, in a loud voice.

She opened her eyes. "What? I like to fall asleep to music."

"Does it have to be so loud?" I said.

She rolled her eyes, then punched a button on her device and the music got softer.

"Don't you have headphones?" I said.

"No, I asked you if I could buy some while we were at the drugstore, but you said 'essentials only' like an old bitch."

"Excuse me?" I said, putting my hand on my chest. "Since when are three-hundred dollar earbuds essential? I said you could buy the twenty-dollar ones."

She rolled her eyes, and turned over, facing away from me.

I turned off the music, then went over to her, standing in front of her. "What's up with you?"

She shook her head. "I'm tired! That's all, and I wanted to listen to my music!"

“No really,” I sat on the bed, moving my arms to be around her neck.
“What’s wrong?”

She closed her eyes, and had her mouth in a tight line.

I kissed her lips softly, and she winced, then pulled away.

“Hey!” I said. “You’re worrying me.”

“And you’re worrying me!” she said. “You’re practically assuming the role of the housewife here to Stephen!”

“Shh,” I said, cradling her in my arms. “It’s only for a short while, and he did rescue our asses from that prison or whatever.”

“I know, I know, and I have no idea why I’m being jealous, or why...”

“Why what?” I said.

“There’s like a buzzing in my head.” She shook her head. “It’s giving me an awful headache, which is why I wanted to sleep.”

I kissed her softly and this time she didn’t cringe. “Okay, baby. You sleep for awhile, and we’ll talk when you wake up, okay?”

She nodded, eyes already closing. “Can you turn the music back on?”

“Yes, just not so loud.”

She sighed, but then nodded.

I thumbed her device back to play but turned the volume to a more reasonable level.

She was breathing softly and regularly, and I kissed her head as I left the bedroom.

“Everything okay?” Stephen said, when I got back out on the patio.

“Yeah, she’s upset and tired.” I thumped my pack of cigarettes, then pulled one out.

Stephen lit it with a little smile.

“Sorry, it’s been ages, and I was dying for one.”

“No worries.”

I stood looking over the placid water of the lake, smoking and finally able to relax a bit.

“Quite a day,” Stephen said, handing me a drink.

“You can say that again.”

“We’ll get our bearings then decide what to do next.”

“We don’t have much time to do that, do we?” I said, taking a sip. It was a gin and tonic with a splash of lime, just like I liked. He really was a kind man.

“Not much.” He sighed. “If we’re going to be onsite, we’ll need airline tickets, luggage, the works.”

“Will these IDs you created stand up to that?”

He nodded. “Yep, best in the business.”

“Thank you so much for this, Stephen. You have no idea how grateful we are.”

“Well, after what happened...”

I nodded. “Well, you’ve certainly repaired that.”

He looked at me, and I swallowed a bit. I didn’t like the way the moonlight played off his gray eyes. “Have I?”

Feeling flushed, I nodded. “Goodness, I don’t know if it’s the gin or my hormones, but I think I need to turn in as well.”

He smiled. “We all should, I suppose.”

I hated leaving him out there alone. I felt like I should do something for him, after-all, he was a very kind man.

Frowning, I shook my head. Karyn wasn’t the only one feeling a buzzing in her head.

“You okay?” he spoke in a soft low tone that gave me shivers.

“Yes, but I better go in before—“

“Before what?”

I took a big gulp of the gin and tonic, then set the glass down loudly.

“Goodnight, Stephen.”

“It’s Frank, now, remember?”

The buzzing grew louder, and I nodded. “Hehe, yes. Frank.”

“Goodnight, Madeline.”

I shivered, wanting to feel his arms around me, but forced myself to get up and to leave the porch. I went into the small bathroom and removed all my makeup, then deep conditioned my hair. I put it into a plastic net, then went into the bedroom where I put on the soft cotton pajamas I’d purchased earlier in the day.

Stealing into bed next to Jessic...Karyn, I shivered a bit thinking about how deep his voice was, and the way the moonlight had reflected off his gray eyes. Grinding my teeth, and wrapped my arms around my sleeping wife, and nestled my head in the crook of her neck.

The music annoyed me. I should have turned it off before getting in bed.

Karyn snored softly, deeply asleep. I reached over and thumbed the device, and the music stopped.

Karyn’s eyebrows drew together a bit, but she didn’t wake up, and I snuggled up to her again, and closed my eyes.

Everything in the cell had been metal; metal floor, metal bed with a thin pad, metal commode, metal walls. It felt wonderful not to be surrounded by, or in contact with, steel. It felt jarring to me, and I kept startling myself awake, thinking I was dreaming and back in the cold metal cell.

Was I really here? Or was I dreaming I was here?

Frank is such a kind man.

The words crept under my skin, like a story you tell yourself.

Now I knew why Jessie wanted the music. It drowned out the words.

I reached over, and turned it back on again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“Mom, get away from me!” Something pushed at me, and I struggled awake.

Opening my eyes, a semi-furious Jessica glared at me. “Hmm?”

“You’re all snuggled up to me and you drooled down the back of my neck. Eww!”

I sat up, confused. How had I gotten into Jessica’s bed? How much had I had to drink last night?

“Jesus, Mom! Get out of my bed!” she pushed at me.

I shook my head. Something was wrong. Very very wrong.

“What’s going on in here?” Frank said, opening the door.

“Mom got drunk last night and slept in *my* bed! Now she won’t get out!”

Frank grinned. “I wondered.”

I looked up at him, confused. “Frank?”

“Come on, sweetheart. Let’s get you some hair of the dog.” He took my hand, and I allowed him to lead me out of Jessica’s room. I wasn’t even in

my nightgown, still dressed from the night before.

“I’ll let you take a shower and wake up,” Frank said. “You want a mimosa or a bloody mary on the deck?”

I thought about it. I liked both in the morning but felt like...

“Bloody Mary,” I said. “Heavy on the...”

“Heavy on the vodka, light on the tomato, I got you.” Frank kissed me on the head.

Blinking bleary eyes, I stumbled into the shower. I felt awful. Achy, sore, tired, like I hadn’t slept at all. My mouth was a parched desert in the middle of a drought.

I let the hot water sluice over me, then washed slowly, body and hair. I barely remembered the night before, Frank and I had drinks on the deck after a day in town. We were on holiday upstate. I was Madeline Barnett, just like I’d always been and Frank was my husband, and he *was such a kind man*.

I blinked. But...that wasn’t right.

I rinsed my body and hair out, then conditioned it, and got out of the shower.

Swiping the steam off the mirror, I stared at my face. Madeline’s face. Joyce’s face.

It wasn’t *my* face it was...

A horrid headache came on, and I almost screamed. Sitting down on the commode, I held my hands to my head. Turning around, I lifted the lid and dry-heaved into the basin.

Madeline, Joyce, Madeline, Joyce...I was both and neither. I was *Robert!*

And Jessica...that wasn’t right, she wasn’t Jessica. It felt both right and wrong at the same time. The headache grew worse, and I heaved some

more.

Jessica...Ca...Ca....Karyn! Jessica was really Karyn, and I was really Joyce...no, ROBERT.

Jesus, someone had done a number on me. My brain absolutely refused to accept it. It felt wrong like wearing wool pants and a tumbleweed blouse, all thorns and uncomfortable. What made sense, what was normal, natural was that I was Madeline, my daughter was Jessica, and my husband was Frank. Yes, so nice, so normal, so natural, and *Frank was such a kind man*.

I smiled at how kind he was. I could smell frying bacon and brewing coffee. And I knew he had a lovely breakfast set out for us.

I dried my hair. Jesus, it had gone gray, I really needed to see a hairdresser. We'd passed a couple in town and I looked for my phone...

You need to keep yourself in top shape to please your husband. Ran through my mind.

Yes, absolutely true. I needed to keep myself in top shape. When was the last time I'd colored my hair?

I grabbed the blow dryer and did the best I could, then applied makeup. I found a light blouse, slacks, and low-heeled shoes. Aha! My phone was on the nightstand next to our bed. I grabbed it, and googled the nearest hairdresser, then called and made an appointment for later that morning.

"Mmmm, something smells wonderful!" I said, breezing out onto the deck where Frank and Jessie were waiting patiently.

"Hello, darling, we were just about to eat without you!"

I smiled as he kissed me on the cheek. "Sorry, I don't know what came over me."

We all sat in our accustomed places. Jessie wore a skimpy top and micro skirt.

“Going somewhere?” I asked.

“Dave and the guys are taking a sailboat out. They asked me to go.”

I glanced at Frank. David Nillson was Jessie’s *Homme du jour*; they had met the first night we’d been on holiday.

Frank shrugged his shoulders.

“No drinking, no drugs, and no sex,” I said. “I have a hair appointment this morning anyway.”

“Mom! Jesus, you’re old-fashioned!”

“And be home by sundown, so we can go to dinner at the Sand Dollar.”

She sighed. “But what if they want to go—“

“No buts, young lady. Home by sundown, or you stay put for the day!”

Jessie rolled her eyes. “Okayy.”

“Who else is going?”

It was my standard routine. Raising a daughter in today’s world meant knowing exactly who she would be surrounding herself with.

“Carla, Stacy, April, Maggie...the usual, Mother.”

I knew all of the other girls by heart since we traveled up here each year. Most of them were good girls except... “You be careful with that Maggie Branson, she’s a little too wild child if you ask me.”

“Oh, mother, just because she has black hair.”

“And black makeup, and black clothes, and black boots. Will she really enjoy being out in the sun, or will she perish like her kind usually—“

“She’s goth, Mom, not a vampire.”

“You know what I’m saying, Jessica Marie Barnett. I know the types of people she hangs around and—“

“Mom, oh my gawd, just leave it already!” Jessie’s voice rose to that strident level I hated. “We’ll be on a sailboat, not going to a dungeon!”

I nodded and looked at Frank. *Say something!*

“Listen to your mother, young lady.” Frank continued to eat his breakfast.

I sighed. Useless. “Anyway, you know the rules. You be back by sundown or you’ll have no phone for the rest of the trip.”

“Yes, Mother.”

I smiled brightly, scooping up my Bloody Mary and taking a big sip.

It was perfect. “Mmmmm, thank you, darling, you always make the best Bloody Marys.”

“I don’t know why you say ‘no drinking’ when you both drink like fishes,” Jessica mumbled, looking down at her plate.

“Your mother and I are of legal age, baby. You’ll be able to drink when you turn twenty-one.”

Jessie sighed, dramatically. It almost made me wonder if she was having her menses, she usually wasn’t this cranky in the mornings, but that wasn’t for another three days.

Another three days...

I frowned, thinking about that. Something was happening in another three days. What was it?

“What time is your hair appointment?” Frank said.

Was it something holiday related? No, that couldn’t be true, we were a week or so out from the fourth of July.

“Honey?” Frank said.

“Hmm?” I responded. “Oh, it’s at...” I glanced down at my watch. It was nearly nine. “Oh! I have to run!”

I stuffed a bit of bacon in my mouth, then took a huge gulp of Bloody Mary. It slid down lovingly, giving me a warm glow inside.

“So we all circle back here at sundown?” Frank said.

“You’ll be okay by yourself, I assume?” I said.

“Yeah, I might go fish with Evan.”

I guffawed at that. *Fishing with Evan* was code for *drinking at the bar*.

“Well, you be careful, darling, regardless.” I kissed him softly on the lips.

“Ewww, you two get a room!” Jessie said.

I smushed her hair, which I knew she hated, then dashed off the deck and into the SUV. I put on a pair of sunglasses, arranged myself in the seat, then backed out of the driveway.

Ambition floated through my mind, but I was too focused on my hair appointment to give it any attention.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Salon was a three-station shop in the middle of the new strip mall at the end of the town's main street. It had a Unique name, 'Tran's studios,' and it was run by a Korean lady named Tran who was mid-sixties, and had such a heavy accent I could hardly understand her.

I basically found a style in the book, a chin-length bob that would be little trouble to maintain, and showed her the tone of blonde I wanted to be, then she led me to the hair wash station.

Something about the hair washing made me very sleepy. I probably shouldn't have had the bloody mary that morning, my eyelids almost instantly slid shut the moment the warm water started cascading on my scalp.

I hardly remember getting up from my chair and dreamed of going...somewhere else. It's strange because it didn't dream a hair salon, it was more of a health spa because I was led to a small room with sand in an intricate pattern, and an older man who sat in the center basically naked

except for a knot of cotton around his pelvis as he held a huge sand stylus. I sat on one side of the room, and someone else sat on the other...she was tan, younger than me, maybe mid-thirties, with sandy blonde hair, light blue eyes, and a fit and trim body.

I should have been very upset, but I *just didn't care* so I sat in the middle as sound filled the room, and the stylus was set cycling between us. When it touched my skin, I felt a strange *rushing*, and then I awoke again to see a much older, overweight woman in her sixties across from me who looked somehow very familiar and yet strange.

I was led from the room, and back into a styling chair, and a cape was draped over me. When I opened my eyes I had tan skin and light blue eyes.

Tran began cutting and trimming my hair as I frowned. Something didn't feel right.

Later in the afternoon, I made it back to the condo we'd rented on the beach. I wondered if Frank was still '*fishing*' or if he was napping. I glanced in the mirror at my new 'do' and gave it a quick touch-up as well as applied some nude lipstick. I looked good, felt good!

"Madeline, you got it going *on*, girl," I said to my mirror self.

Getting out of the car, I made my way into the townhouse. The sun was shining brightly, I could smell the breeze of the ocean, and I realized I still could get a few hours of tanning in before Jessie came home.

But first things first.

I set my purse and the products I'd purchased at the salon, then made my way down to the bedroom where Frank was taking a nap. He snored loudly, the covers clutched underneath his bearded chin.

I took off all my clothes, then slid under the covers and up to him, pressing my body to his tightly.

“Mmmm, hello there,” he said. His voice was husky from sleep and whiskey.

I kissed his mouth, feeling the rasp of his beard always got me going.

“Hello yourself,” I said in a soft voice.

“Mmm, you look sexy.”

“You like?” I turned my head, glancing into the mirror behind the bed. “It’s a shade or two lighter than I usually get, but I thought summer!”

“Mmmhmmm,” he grabbed me by the hips and pulled me to him. I could feel he was already excited.

My fingers slid over his meaty chest, tracing his tattoos, then down below.

He grinned.

Afterward, I took a quick shower, then put on my bikini and slipped out the back door and down to the sand. We still had a couple of hours before sundown, so I applied some suntan oil and stretched out on one of the beach loungers. I put on a big floppy sun-hat, some sunglasses and sighed, inhaling the sea breeze and relaxing.

“This seat taken?” Frank said, flopping down on the lounge next to me.

“That’s where my husband will be sitting,” I said.

“Oh?” He set a cooler of beer next to him, and took off his shirt, revealing his tattooed upper body. “He’s probably some super co-ed tanned college grad, isn’t he.”

I giggled. “You’d be surprised.”

Frank reached over and we entwined fingers.

“Sun feels good, doesn’t it?” He applied some suntan oil over his hairy broad chest.

“Delicious,” I said.

“Jessie called, said they’re on the way back.”

“Oh, good. I’m already getting hungry.”

“Mmm, yes. Steaks at Sand Dollar, I can’t wait.”

I took out my water bottle and sipped some cold water. It had been a lovely first week of vacation. I didn’t have to be back in the City until the end of the month. I had three residences going through escrow and I’d need to be back for the closings.

I thought about the six-digit paydays and sighed. It was nice being one of the more successful real estate agents in New York. I could afford this and have Frank follow his dream job as a high-end motorcycle mechanic. He’d opened a small shop on the east side of the city and had attracted a few high-end customers.

A lot better than his Harley days.

Frank is such a kind man.

I’d married Frank after divorcing Jessie’s father who had loved alcohol more than he loved his family.

Glancing down at the six-pack of Budweiser, I realized Frank might be following in his footsteps. He *had* been drinking an awful lot on this trip. He cracked open his second and took a large gulp.

“Honey, don’t you think you should go easy on those?” I said.

He gave me a stare and continued to drink without regard.

I felt a weird little *thrill* go through me. It was one of the things that was so attractive about Frank. He really didn’t give a flying fuck what I thought,

said, or did. He was so unabashedly *himself* he rarely cared what anyone else thought.

I knew he loved me more than anyone in the world and would burn the world down to protect Jessie and I. Who really cared if he wanted to drink a six-pack before dinner?

An hour or so later, I heard the sliding door of the condo open and shut, and Jessie bounced down the slope, wearing her one-piece bathing suit. She wanted a bikini, but I refused to allow a fourteen-year-old girl to wear something that might catch the eye of any pedophile.

“Hi, Mom! Hi, Frank!”

“Did you have fun, sweetheart?” I said as she gave me a hug.

“Yes!” she held out her phone with pictures of her on the Hobie-cat sailboat. “It was *huge* and we went *fast!*”

“I’m glad you had such a nice time, baby.” I scrolled through her photos. Almost every one had a picture of a rangy thin boy of about sixteen. “Is this David?”

“Yeah!” she giggled. “He’s such a goofball!”

Goofball.

Visions of Karyn filled my mind. “*You’re such...a...goofball...*”

I frowned as memories came flooding back. Memories of Robert and Karyn Adamson. Living in Utah, working as an insurance adjuster. Growing up with a family of three brothers.

Goofball. Such a Karyn word. Her favorite word.

For me.

I inhaled and stood up, looking around, looking down at myself. I looked at Karyn/Jessie in confusion, then over at Frank.

“What the fuck is going on?” I said, as more and more memories filtered down.

“Mom, what’s wrong?” the child who had been my wife said. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost!”

Frank looked at me and sighed, taking out his phone and typing in a text.

“*You* did this to us?”

“Look, it was the only way of getting you out of there.”

“But we aren’t *us* anymore are *we*?” my voice rose to a strident pitch. People were starting to look over at us as I was gripped in a grip of panic.

“Calm the fuck down,” Frank said, standing up.

I looked down at Jessie/Karyn. Her eyes were tearing up. “Mom, you’re scaring me!”

I grabbed her hand. “I’m not your mother!”

Pulling her with me, we ran.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“Mom, where are we going?” Jessie/Karyn cried after I pulled her into our condo.

“Pack a bag!” I screamed into her face. Locking the sliding door behind me, I grabbed my pull-along suitcase and started cramming clothes into it.

“But Mom, vacation isn’t over—“

“Honey!” I gripped her small shoulders, looking down into her eyes. She was so young how was this possible? She had been herself that morning, Transmigration Studios had evidently swapped her into a young girl’s body.

I looked into the mirror and saw I had also been swapped. It was a sight better than Joyce’s overweight older form, I was easily mid-thirties, toned, tanned, blonde...but definitely not me.

“Look into the mirror and who do you see?” I turned her in front of me, looking over her head.

She stared into the mirror. She had light brown shoulder-length hair framing a cherubic face and just the beginning of breasts, with light blue

eyes like mine. It wasn't the body of a fourteen-year-old, maybe twelve, or god forbid, ten? Somehow that number sprang into my mind as I held her.

"I see me, and you, Mommy, standing over me."

"Honey, look at me." I knelt, to stare into her eyes.

She looked at me, fear bright in her young eyes.

"Please tell me you remember Karyn Adamson?"

She blinked..."No? Is that someone you work with?"

"No, honey. Close your eyes."

She did as instructed, though I could tell from her trembling chin she was frightened.

"Does the name Robbie Adamson mean anything to you?"

"N.."

"No don't answer," I said. "Think about it, Robbie and Karyn Adamson."

She frowned and I could tell she was starting to remember.

"Karyn was so pretty. And she had a YouTwit account and TalkTalk?"

"Yessss," keep going.

She frowned. "Something...happened to her, didn't it, Mommy? She...disappeared?"

"Think honey. What happened to Karyn and Robbie."

She frowned cutely.

God, she was so young!

"You are my light, my heart, my.."

"Spirit, my strength.." I continued.

"You are my everything," she continued. "I take you to be my husband, and be faithful, honest, and trust you."

"I will respect and care for you."

"Through the best and worst of that is to come..."

“For as long as we live.” We said together.

She opened her eyes. “Mommy, why do I know those words?”

“Honey, you used to be Karyn Adamson. Can you remember?”

She nodded a little but frowned like she was in pain. “It hurts my brain to think like that!” She started to cry.

“I know, baby.” I hugged her tightly, feeling her small body pressed up to me. “But they’ve done something to our minds this time. We have to fight it, and we have to run away from here.”

She wiped her eyes, nodding. “Where will we go?”

“I don’t know honey, but we have to get away from here. Frank...Stephen will be back and he’ll try to keep us this way forever.”

She nodded, then ran to her room and I heard her gathering her clothes.

Stephen knocked on the sliding door behind me. “You can’t do this, Joyce. Let’s talk.”

“The time for talking is over I screamed, throwing whatever I could into the suitcase, then zipping it up.

“Let’s go baby!” I said.

Karyn came out of her room with her pink pull-along suitcase. “I’m scared, Mom....Robbie.”

“Me too, honey, but we have to get to the car. I’m going to open it from here, then we’re going to run as fast as we can until we are in the car. Can you do that for me?”

She nodded her little head.

I grabbed the keys, purse, and as an afterthought, Stephen’s wallet from the entry table.

“Go!” I said, and we started running for the SUV.

Stephen came around the condo, and grabbed me from behind. I screamed. "FIRE! FIRE! FIRE!"

"You're not going anywhere, bitch!" he said, trying to force me back toward the condo. I writhed in his grasp, then kicked him hard in the groin, and shoved an elbow into his throat. It caught him by surprise and he doubled over, gasping and grabbing his pelvis.

"What's going on?" A woman said, opening a condo door, two doors down from us.

"He's trying to rape me!" I screamed, running for the car. Several people came out at that point and started to hold hands up to Stephen, who was trying to chase after me but couldn't catch his breath.

"Listen, my dude, you might want to let her.." a man said, trying to pull Stephen away from the car.

I got in the car and looked back to make sure Karyn was in. "Seatbelt!"

She nodded and buckled herself in. I could see tears streaming down her little face in the rearview mirror as I started the car, and slammed it into reverse.

"You won't get away with this!" Stephen yelled, trying to jump onto the hood of the car, but his new body was stout and a bit overweight so he couldn't leverage himself up enough and he slid back down.

Pressing down on the gas, the car backed down the driveway and out onto the street. I was glad another car wasn't coming as I threw it into drive, then slammed my foot down on the gas.

I almost lost control of it right there as the small SUV twisted from side to side and I think it might have gone up on two wheels, but I managed to maintain control as we streaked down the road. Glancing in my rearview

mirror, I could see Stephen still doubled over in the middle of the road, bent over double as some of the neighbors tried to talk him down.

We made it out to the highway. I had to consider which direction we went.

New York would have been the best option to lose any pursuit since the roadways north of the state were limited. I could also go east, maybe toward Boston.

“Where are we going to go?”

I sighed, weighing options. “Boston,” I said, and turned right.

Light rain started to fall. My heart was pounding in Madeline’s chest. I took some deep breaths; it wouldn’t be a good look if I got pulled over by state police.

“Are you okay, honey?” I said, looking in the review mirror.

She had her earbuds in.

“Yes.”

“So you can remember now who we were?”

She nodded. “It hurts to remember, though.”

“I know.”

She held up her hands, staring at them. “I’m not even fourteen, am I? I look like I’m younger than that.”

I sighed. “I think you may only be ten.”

She nodded. “That’s what feels right now. Something in my brain keeps saying: It’s only natural that you’re ten years old.”

My eyes widened, and I pulled the car over to the side of the road.

“Why are we stopping?”

I got out of the car, and immediately wished I’d packed an umbrella. The rain sluiced over my hair, ruining my new hairstyle. I opened her door

quickly.

“What, Mommy?”

“Honey, I think it’s this doing it!” I grabbed her media device.

“But that has my music!”

I threw the thing into the bushes. “We were both listening to it last night, remember?”

Realization dawned in her eyes. “Oh, my God.”

I nodded, as I got back in.

“Jesus, I even got in the back seat!” She said. “They programmed me to be a little girl!”

“We’re going to be okay,” I said, as I pulled the car back onto the highway.

“What are we going to do?” she said.

I sighed. “Some how, Some way, we are going to Abu Dhabi. That’s where all of this ends.”

“That thing you were talking about, Mommy?”

I nodded. “Ambition.”

“Do you think our bodies will be there?”

I winced. Karyn’s body was back in the town we just left. I hadn’t considered that.

It made sense though that whoever had been put into our bodies would be at the event. Whatever was happening there, it was drawing everyone involved in both Transmigration Studios and Lord Mallory INC.

“I think it’s our best bet,” I said.

“What if it’s not, though?” She said in that small voice. “What if I’m stuck like this?”

“We’re going to be okay, baby,” I said. “Regardless, we stick together, right?”

“Through the best and worst of what is to come,” Karyn said.

“For as long as we live.”

I gritted my teeth, furious at the situation I’d allowed us to be put in.

Some how, some way, we were going to be okay.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Getting to Abu Dhabi turned out to be easier than expected. Stephen Fisher, in his infinite *He is such a good man* goodness, had passports in Karyn and my name as Jessica and Madeline Fuller. They were neatly stowed in the glove compartment of the small SUV, along with a ten thousand dollars in traveler's cheques.

God Bless the organized man.

Overall the flights took seventeen hours. Seventeen hours with a two hour layover in France with a person in a ten-year-old body.

"I'm *bored*," She said, after the first two hours.

"Honey, I know, but this is going to be a long flight, you know this."

"Can I go to the bathroom?"

"You just got back from the bathroom."

"I know, but I have to go again."

I sighed, letting her get out of the seat.

“Hard flying with children,” the woman on my left in the window seat said.

“Yes,” I nodded. I didn’t want to get into details, that the ten-year-old child I was with was really my thirty-two-year-old spouse.

“Cherish them while young, the time passes quickly,” she said.

“Don’t I know it.”

“I’m Edith,” the woman proffered her hand.

“Madeline Barnett,” I said, almost automatically. It was strange how names came so easily with the body.

“How old is she?” The woman smiled.

“Ten.”

Edith patted my hand. “They are such a delight at that age.”

I smiled and nodded.

We’d been looking over our shoulder since our mad dash. I kept imagining men in black suits with sunglasses carrying briefcases and apprehending us at every rest stop, the airport, the gate, leaving on the plane—but no one had.

I expected them when we arrived, but we deplaned without incident.

The sun was setting as I rented another small SUV from the airport. We had less than three hours until the ignition of Ambition, and I figured we would just make it in time.

“Can we please get something to eat?” Karyn said, from the back seat. “I’m starving.”

“Honey, we don’t have time. Here’s some snacks—“

“I’m sick of airplane food!” she yelled.

I spied the golden arches and turned the vehicle into the drive-through lane.

“What do you want?”

“A happy meal!”

I sighed.

Very little of what I would consider ‘Karyn’ remained inside the little girl. She remembered her name, remembered our life, and had memories going all the way back to her own childhood as Karyn, yet she acted very much like the child whose body she inhabited.

I placed our order, then handed Karyn the happy meal. She grinned wildly as she pulled out the toy; a small rainbow-colored pony. Several people on the flights had donated various stuffed animals and other amusements to her. She had an infectious smile and her light blue eyes knew just how to pull heartstrings with just a look.

I knew the location of *Ambition* from the plot maps I’d been privy to during my time at Lord Mallory INC. It was out in the desert, east of the city about 60 km. After studying the GPS locations, I took what I hoped would be the correct highways.

Turned out, I didn’t have to drive far. Traffic backed up along the desert highway less than twenty miles outside of town. I could see a crystal pyramid lit up in the distance with spotlights careening across the sky.

Apparently, Transmigration Studios wanted to advertise the location of the event.

We turned off the highway, following the line of vehicles toward the pyramid. Blue laser beams pirouetted in the air angled down toward the structure. We passed under an archway that had “Welcome to AMBITION!” marked in seven-foot sans-serif letters.

“Are we driving right up to the main entrance?” Karyn said.

“I don’t know what else to do.”

Steel fencing topped with barbed wire surrounded the facility with guardposts and armed security patrolling in four-wheeled motorized light-duty vehicles. Spotlights lit the entire compound. There would be no ‘sneaking in’ to the facility,

I’d have to bluff my way past the entry.

We got to the main entry gate, and I was directed into a long file of vehicles.

“What are we going to do, Mommy?” Karyn said.

“Just...follow my lead, honey.”

We got to the front and a security guard shined a flashlight in our faces. “Tickets?”

“I’m with Lord Mallory INC.”

He nodded, grabbing a tablet from his podium. “Name and position?”

“Uh...Joyce Reagan and I was head insurance analyst.”

He frowned a moment, then paused. “Ah, yes, you’re expected.” He printed out a metallic ‘STAFF’ badge with my name on it. He printed a ‘GUEST’ badge for Karyn and handed them both. You can follow the blue lane markings to the employee’s entrance along the side.”

Shrugging, I nodded then drove in the direction indicated.

“So, we make our escape after being put in these bodies, and you just tell them your name at the entry gate?” Karyn said. “Was that wise?”

“These kinds of companies...sometimes the right-hand doesn’t know what the left hand is doing.”

“But what is going to happen here, Mommy?”

“I’m hoping we can get back to our original bodies, baby. This is going to be some kind of mass Migration event, and I hope we can get back to who we were.”

“All these people are going to change bodies?”

“That’s what I think is going to happen.”

“But you aren’t sure?”

“I’ve never been told what, exactly, is going on out here.”

I parked the car where I was guided. “Well, let’s see what’s going on.”

Opening the door for Karyn, I helped her down. She gripped my hand with her tiny one, tightly.

“I’m scared, Mommy.”

I squeezed her hand. “If for some reason we get separated, meet me back here, okay?”

She nodded, looking up at me with tears brimming in her eyes.

I knelt and looked her square in the face. “Look, if it looks like things are going to go pear-shaped, we’ll get out of here, I promise.”

“Okay.”

“We have to try to find our bodies. Do you think you can help me do that?”

“Yes, Mommy.”

“You know I’m not really your Mommy, right?”

“I know you’re Robbie, but in my brain it makes me feel better to call you Mommy. Plus it helps with our cover.”

I knew it was more than that, but I let it slide.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

We walked down the blue-striped path to an entrance in the side of the crystal pyramid that said. “Employees only.”

Two, armed security guards glanced at the badges hanging from our necks, then waved us through. I swallowed against the fear rising in my throat.

Stepping into the main area, we gasped at the sights.

The crystal pyramid stretched over our heads hundreds of feet above us. The audience sat in chairs neatly arranged into circular rows on the sand. An enormous spindle hung from a thick steel cable in the center of the seating area, where a circular stage had been erected.

The quiet thrum of thousands of voices all speaking in excited tones hummed around us. The blue lines stopped at the sand, but a pathway that led directly up to the stage stretched in front of us.

People walked on the sand, milling and speaking with others. Refrigerated chests with water bottles perched at each intersection and a

staff member handed out water to each guest as they passed by.

“Staff seating is on the stage,” an employee stated. “Up the stairs and to the left.”

I nodded and gripped Karyn’s hand.

“So we need to find our old bodies in all this?” Karyn said.

“Yes, baby.”

I pulled her along as we passed the first row of seats.

“I can’t see over the chairs, Mommy. Can I ride on your shoulders?”

In Madeline’s memories, I remembered carrying Jessica on my shoulders in the pool up to when she got too heavy. I didn’t know if I could still do it, but it was worth a try.

“Stand on the chair, and I’ll squat low.”

She stood on the chair, and I crouched low. She giggled and got on my shoulders. I stood up slowly, trying to keep my balance. She teetered a bit and wrapped her arms around my forehead.

“Better!” she said, scanning the crowd.

We walked through the audience as much as we could, passing through each ring of the circle, before moving on to the next ring. Karyn could see several rows in each direction.

“We will be commencing with our event in less than forty minutes,” intoned a voice that came over loudspeakers from every direction.

“Walk faster, Mommy!” Karyn said.

We had just made it to about the halfway mark when suddenly Karyn pointed and whispered urgently in my ear. “Mommy! I see my old body!”

“Where, baby?” I whispered back

She pointed, and I followed her finger, scanning the crowd. After a few moments, I saw her. The woman had her blond hair up in an intricate hairdo

and was wearing a sparkling silver evening gown. She smiled widely and held a champagne flute, a phone in her hand as she spoke into it. Apparently, she'd activated her old social media accounts and was showing off for her followers.

“Great job, baby!” I said. “Any sign of mine?”

Onstage, a number of people filed to the front of the stage and took a position under the spotlight. They were clad all in white with a top, loose pants, and white sandals. Men and women of different ages circled the stages and stood in each of the spotlights.

“I see it!” Karyn said. She pointed up at the stage.

My body walked along with the platform, then took a position under one of the spotlights. He was in the third circle inward. Shortly afterward, other people wearing white filled in front of him and I lost sight.

“I can't see you anymore, Mommy!” Karyn whispered rather loudly.

I leaned over and set Karyn down on the ground. Kneeling, I looked into her eyes.

“Honey, think you need to be standing next to your body, and I need to stand next to mine.”

She nodded, swallowing.

“When...whatever happens...try to be in physical contact with it.”

“Touch her?”

“That way when this switch happens, you're the closest person to her and if you're touching her, the switch will happen with you two.”

She nodded. “And you'll do the same?”

“Yes.”

“How are you going to get out there, Mommy? It looks like you have to be wearing all white?”

“I’ll figure that out. You just make sure you’re touching your old body, skin to skin when whatever this is happens, okay?”

“Okay.”

“And where do we meet after?”

“At the car.”

“Do you remember how to get there?”

“It’s through that tunnel,” she pointed. “Then into the parking lot, space D87.”

“Perfect, baby.”

“Do you think all the people in this audience are hoping to be swapped into one of those bodies on stage, Mommy?”

“That’s exactly what I think is going to happen.”

“There’s a LOT of people, Mommy.”

“Yes, well, that’s the excitement, right? The allure of being pushed into a body that you have no control over?”

“I suppose.”

“Ten minutes until the initiation of our event commences. Please take your seats.”

“Better hurry, baby, remember what I said.”

“If I have to, I’ll get under her chair, Mommy!”

“That’s a good idea.” I kissed her softly on the cheek. “I’ll see you soon, my brave girl.”

She looked at me. “It was kinda fun being your daughter, Mommy.”

I smiled and brushed her hair out of her eyes and behind her ears. “And I loved being your Mommy.”

She gave me a big hug then and I felt tears bite at the corner of my eyes.

“I’ll be brave, Mommy.”

“Okay.”

And she scampered off toward the row she had seen her body.

I made my way down the path and ascended the stairs leading to the staff platform.

The staff seating was arrayed counter to the...I'd refer to them as 'targets' the people dressed in white who were frozen like statues on their circle. They neither frowned nor smiled, standing immobile on each lit disc. I knew there wasn't a 'personality' in each body, they were empty vessels ready to be filled.

Looking at the audience, and at the staff seating, I made an estimate. And only a one in seven thousand chance of actually getting back to my own body.

I found a chair as close to my body as I could get, directly across the stage. They were on an area of the stage that was a few steps down from mine, but I figured I could jump that space, and hurtle myself onto my body at the required moment. Then it was about a twenty-foot jump down into the audience.

Twenty feet. Land on the balls of your feet and roll, Robbie, roll roll roll and hope you don't snap an ankle.

Regardless of the outcome of the event, I was done trying to get back. If this didn't work, I was going to live with Karyn in whatever state we happened to be in, and live out our lives. This constant state of not knowing, being in flux, temporary identities was getting old. It was time to stop running and start living.

Someone stepped in front of me. Someone exceedingly tall, dark, and dangerous.

“Well, well, Ms. Reagan,” Ex-muritious Forrester said. “I see you were able to join us in the night’s event after all.”

My heart sank.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

“You certainly have a flair for the dramatic, don’t you?” He said, placing a large hand on my shoulder.

“I just wanted my wife to have her body back!” I said, in a quiet urgent voice. “You took it from her...twice!”

Someone stepped up beside him, and I realized it was Stephen, in Frank Barnett’s body. He looked ill-fitting in the tuxedo, with his hair pulled back in a ponytail, and his beard spread out over the lapels of his jacket.

“We could have had a good life, you cunt.” Frank reached for me.

A pair of armed guards grabbed his arms.

“Now, now, Frank. Now is not the time for violence, especially of a woman in public.”

“I was going to bring us here!” he said. “There was no need for you to run like that!”

“How was I supposed to know that?” I said. “You took our bodies away!”

“So we could be a family!”

He shook his head. “You still don’t know what’s going on, do you?”

I shook my head. “If you had just told me, maybe we wouldn’t have run. I didn’t trust you!”

Ex-Muritious smiled. “After tonight, none of this is going to matter. Both of you, take your seats, the show is about to begin.” He released my shoulder, and I stared up at him in confusion.

I sat down in the chair, and Stephen stalked off with the guards, mumbling angrily.

Trembling, I took out my purse and found some tissue. I opened my compact and dabbed my eyes, fixing my eye makeup, and trying to collect myself.

What did it mean that they weren’t placing me in some room? Why was I being allowed to sit with the rest of the staff, after being incarcerated at the Lord Mallory building?

I didn’t understand, any of it.

Ex-Muritious stood at the podium and took up the microphone.

“Welcome, everyone, to Transmigration Studios!”

Cheering and applause sounded from the crowd and the staff around me.

“Through a patented process that only Lord Mallory Incorporated has developed, you will get to participate in a controlled transmigratory event, the likes of which the world has never seen!”

The audience cheered again, applauding loudly.

“Underneath this dome, on this stage are seventy-two young bodies in the peak of youth. They are free from any contagion or disease known to man. We have even eradicated small conditions like sinusitis, and tooth decay. They are as healthy as they possibly can be!”

The audience applauded.

“And tonight, seventy-two of you in the audience, or in the seating on the stage, will get a new life!”

Again, people applauded and cheered.

“Let’s start the Pendulum!”

A semi-naked man stepped out onto the stage, wearing little but a loincloth over his groin. He took ahold of the steel cable as it was released.

Loinclothed men stood at several golden bowls arrayed around the stage and began rubbing the outer rim with a rubber mallet, creating a deep intonation. The lights dimmed and the spindle began to trace lines in the sand around the seated participants.

“Do not fear the spindle. It is created from a special material that can pass through normal mass. It is the device that touches the spiritual plane and draws forth the spirit from our bodies to be captured into other bodies.”

The spindle swept through the sand and the crowd, gathering momentum and speed.

The sounds increased in volume, intensity, and pitch. It had to be electronically generated, it was impossible for those bowls to change pitch like that.

My heart sank as the spindle passed through people on the event floor, then touched people in the staff audience. As each swap occurred, a light would go out, and the person on the disk would become animated, looking down and gasping as they discovered they were in a new body.

Things were going along to plan when a breeze suddenly struck up from inside the pyramid.

Ex-muritious frowned, looking over at someone off-stage.

“Ah, nothing to worry about folks, we think it’s just from the size of the...”

The wind suddenly turned into a gale, blowing in a circular motion in time with the spindle. The sounds from the speakers rose in pitch as the spindle cycled faster and faster, blown off track by the wind as if an enormous cyclone was starting to build...

Which is exactly what was happening. People began to scream as chairs were blown over, drink carts, snack stations, signs, flags, and other parts of the decorations all became airborne. The spindle whizzed in a furious pattern, slowly expanding as the enclosure creaked from the momentum contained within.

Panicked, I ran from the stage. I had to find Karyn, this wasn't good, this wasn't planned at all.

People in the audience screamed as they tried to run from the arena. Unfortunately, all the doors had been closed and locked, and the wind rose and rose. The lights went next, in showers of sparks, they became swept from their attachments, some of them falling in the center of the maelstrom.

The center.

I ran through the crowd and miracle upon miracle found Karyn crouched under a chair.

"Honey! We have to run toward the center, not the edge!" I took her hand.

The wind almost knocked us off our feet as the cyclone continued to turn, sweeping chairs and people off their feet and up into the cone of the storm. The spindle spun faster and faster, the steel cable still not breaking, but I knew it wouldn't last long and when it broke, the sides of the building were glass and...

I pulled Karyn into my arms and ran for the center of the storm. I could feel myself being pushed as if from an invisible hand and felt the bite of the

sand as it seared against my flesh. Karyn screamed, crying against the storm as I forced our way through to the center.

And finally broke through. We panted, Karyn crying, as I dropped to the sand in the center of the Maelstrom.

The wind began to tear panels from the side of the building. They crashed with an infinite tinkling of shattered glass. And just when I thought we were going to die from the collapse of the pyramid, the steel cable broke.

A subsonic explosion boomed through the desert night at the release of the cable. Blue light streaked out in a fractal, ever-widening pattern with lightning quickness in a circular wave away from the building. The sands of the sahara rose up in hemispherical patterns at the passage of the wind.

At the time I had no idea the subsonic wave engulfed the entire world in six seconds.

Planes fell from the skies as pilots no longer controlled their bodies. Cars crashed on millions upon millions of highways as drivers no longer drove. Boats ran ashore, helicopters careened out of control, Motorcycles spilled riders, and the disasters on a global scale were epic as people's souls were ripped from their bodies...

...and into others.

"Are you okay?" I asked as we huddled under the wreckage on the sand. The wind had passed over, leaving carnage and wreckage in its wake.

"I think so?" Karyn replied. I let her go and inspected us both. Aside from a few scratches and one small cut on the back of her leg, Karyn was okay. I had suffered the brunt of our mad dash to the center of the maelstrom. My left ankle refused to hold my weight, and my right eye was scratched from the blowing sand. I needed to wash my face badly but

attempted to dig all the sand out of my hair and nose, spitting the grit from my mouth.

“Are you going to be able to walk, Mommy?” Karyn said.

“If you can help me.”

She nodded and tried to help me across the arena toward the exit doors. I didn't like the look of the superstructure, it was careening to the left and I could see several of the metal supports bending. Glass fell all around us, crashing to the sand as the few survivors limped toward exits.

“Oh my god, who am I?” one man said, pawing at the front of his suit. “You're in my body!” another woman said. “And you're in mine!” a third responded.

Bodies were strewn in various states of injury and death all around the arena. It was like God shook the entire place like a child shaking a rattle.

“Don't look, baby.” I hid Karyn's eyes from one person who had been disemboweled by a sheet of glass. She moaned, looking at her hands, a stranger's hands as she tried to gather her intestines back into herself.

With a loud CRACK, one of the supports of the pyramid gave way.

“Run, baby!” I said, trying to limp and run at the same time.

“Come on, Mommy!” she yelled, pulling me along.

My ankle screamed agony as I tried to run/limp toward the exit. We made it into the tunnel just as tons of glass and steel cascaded down onto the survivors in the arena.

CHAPTER THIRTY

One year later.

I brought out the birthday cake with eleven candles arranged on top of the pink frosting.

“Here’s the birthday cake!” I set it down and started lighting the candles as the girls all giggled and laughed climbing up onto chairs at the dinner table in our small apartment.

“Ooh, Tiny Little Ponies are my favorite!” Jessie said, grinning. I loved seeing her smile, loved seeing her happy for the first time in a long time.

It had been a rough year. The metempsychosis apotheosis event had been the single most catastrophic accident in human history. Nearly everyone the world over had been transmigrated into another body. Strangely, it only affected humans, not other animals.

“Happy Birthday To You!” I sang. The children and other parents joined in. “Happy Birthday, to you!”

Jessie beamed at me, the lights from the flickering candle making her light blue eyes dance.

“Happy Birthday dear Jessica, Happy Birthday, to you!”

She smiled and blew out the candles. Everyone cheered.

I cut the cake into equal portions, then began ladling them onto paper plates to be handed out.

“She’s so adorable,” Jinny Thomas said, taking a plate. “You’re raising such a wonderful child.”

“Aww, thank you.” I handed out more plates. The girls giggled and talked at the table each one appeared happy and glad to be at Jessie’s party.

Three of the girls had been older women, one much older just a year prior. Studies showed that adults swapped into younger children shortly became children in mind as well as body. The intellect never disappeared, but the immature brain was unable to comprehend advanced concepts. They appeared perfectly capable of relearning, so the ‘new children’ as they were called, adapted and were fostered by loving ‘parental figures.’

The world had undergone an evolution in the last year. Gone were any race or class tensions. When Uncle Albert was suddenly LaShonda, the woman across the street, racial disparity had virtually disappeared.

Gender constructs around work and home also had disappeared overnight. Women now earned the same as men, trans-people could be rehomed into gender aligned bodies, and age discrimination was a thing of the past.

That was the bright side.

The dark side — overnight, the Lord Mallory Patent was worth it’s weight in platinum or whatever the current cyber-currency was. Transmigration studios were as common as fast food restaurants as

everyone immediately wanted to swap into their original body, or into a more id-aligned body.

Except for us.

Apparently, being in the center of the cyclone did something to our minds and souls. We could no longer be placed into any other body. I had tried to have Jessica placed into a more age-aligned body, but the swapping apparatus treated her like a piece of furniture. It was as if we didn't exist to the transmigration process.

Which, in the scheme of things, wasn't that bad.

I was Madeline Barnett, divorced single mother of Jessica Barnett. We lived in Prescott Arizona, and I worked as an insurance agent for Prescott City Insurance.

Jessie rarely spoke about our previous lives. She remembered them, distantly, but she was excited to be a child again and learning how to succeed in this changed world.

She giggled, happily as she opened her presents.

“Ooh, your own purse!” I said. “Now you have something to put your makeup in!”

She rolled her eyes at me and gave me the look. She looked at me like that when I was laying on the mother to little girl act a little too convincingly.

Stephen had been flipped into a male intern's body. He reached out to me at one point, hoping maybe I was ready to reconcile, but I ignored his texts and calls.

Ex-Muritious disappeared the night of the Apotheosis. He wasn't among the casualties, and he never revealed himself if he was among the swapped. He could be in another body and 'playing the part,' which is what

multitudes of people had done. Inmates from government incarceration facilities had found themselves in other bodies. Rather than expose who they had been, they chose to try to blend in with the world. Some had apparently found success, others had been exposed.

OriginID was a new term for the body you had been born into. We all had OriginID information associated with any federal or local state government information. They'd been able to identify a 'soulprint' a unique frequency oscillation for each individual human soul. Since people could change bodies frequently, it became imperative for the government to keep tabs on its inhabitant.

My OriginID read 'Joyce Reagan,' however. Robert Adamson had been tagged while I had been in Joyce's body.

Sometimes the 'who was whom' gave me a headache.

"You okay, Mommy?" Jessie asked, looking up at me. She wore a multicolored party dress and a silver tiara from the Tiny Little Ponies cartoon series.

"Yes, baby. Just a bit tired."

"I can tell everyone to go home if you need rest."

"Aww, no baby. I'm happy you're having a nice time."

"It really is fun." She smiled. "Debbie said I can go to her party next week, too!"

"Congratulations, sweetheart!"

She twirled and was gone, running to be with her friends.

After everyone had gone home, and I had done the dishes and cleaned up the last of the mess, I flopped down on the couch. Jessie played with some of her new toys on the floor.

I triggered the television and watched the last of the news. The world had been digging out from under the rubble left from the Apotheosis. World governments had combined to assist each other with aid and support with rebuilding. Mental and spiritual counseling had skyrocketed as more and more people delved into their identities and who they were, under the skin.

Jessie climbed up onto the couch next to me and slid under my arm.

“Did you have a nice birthday?”

“Yes, Mommy. It was the best day of my life!”

I smiled, ruffling her hair. We’d had it cut a bit shorter since the Apotheosis. “I’m glad.”

“Wanna know why it was the best day of my life, Mommy?”

“Of course.”

“Because all the other days are in the past. This is the day that happened now.”

I liked that. “You are wise beyond your years.”

“I know!” she giggled

“Do you ever miss...”

“Mommmyyyy, you know I don’t like to talk about that stuff.”

“I know, but I just wondered.”

“No, Mommy, I don’t miss it. Does that make you sad?”

I looked down at her. She stared at me with those blue eyes, her blond curls in a tussle from the days events. She had frosting at the corners of her mouth, and she still wore the tiara I had given her.

“A little,” I said. “I miss Karyn, sometimes.”

She nodded, threading her small hand with mine.

“But I am happy you’re not sad, though,” I said.

“My first childhood wasn’t very happy.”

I nodded, squeezing her hand.

“My dad was an asshole, and he made me hate myself.”

This was information she’d never shared with me. Karyn’s childhood had always been something of a mystery. I knew her mother, but had never met her father.

“It’s part of the reason I got into social media. I craved the attention.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Mommy, you’re giving me the childhood I always dreamed of. I never had a birthday party like this. Not with friends, and cake, and a tiara.”

I smiled, toying with her hair. “Not a tiny ponies party?”

“No!” She stood on the couch, and put her arms around my neck looking into my eyes. “And I will never forget this, either Mommy.”

“I’m glad baby.”

“You are the best Mommy in the whole world!” She hugged me tightly.

“And you are the best little girl.”

She giggled and pulled away. “Think I’m going to go to bed now.”

“Alright, baby. Go get ready for bed, and I’ll be in to read you a story.”

“Brush my teeth?”

“Yes, brush your teeth.”

She scooted herself off the couch, and I heard her going down the hall and into the bathroom.

Sighing, I looked around at our small apartment. It wasn’t the life I had originally planned to have with Karyn. I wanted to have children with her, not raise her as a child. But at least we were together, healthy, and happy.

And that's how we would stay.

<the end>

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