

Trapped in Amber

(AKA: Untitled Hallmark Christmas Story)

By Fakeminsk

Prologue

He told me to write it all down, so here I am. Which makes it sound like I'm only doing it because he told me to, like he's in charge. And yes, I suppose he *is*, in charge that is, but in this case, he's also right. I do need to write this down and maybe, in doing so, make sense of it all. For example, the simple fact that this room used to be *hers* and now it's *mine*. I'm still working through how I feel about that. He's placed a desk in the corner by the window, which looks down over the front of the house. The ground is dusted with snow and gleams in the sun. A few trees line the road. One of them, a slender poplar, grows at an angle to the ground, bark torn up where a car once hit it. For a while, it seemed the tree was dead but with the spring, the buds that formed in winter swelled, unfurled and blossomed with new life.

I told you it'd pull through, he said. You were worried, but they're very tough trees, you know, poplars. Flexible and resilient. Then his face split in a wide smile, inordinately proud of himself. Just like you.

I procrastinate. If I'm being charitable, I could say I'm organizing my thoughts. For some time, I stare out the window, looking down at the road and the tree and the snow. My old car, which I hardly use any more, is parked next to his truck. Then, moving slowly, I walk around the room. There's a framed picture of the two of us sitting on the dresser. I pick it up and this, too, is a memory to consider. Contained within the simplicity of its wooden frame, the photograph tells its own story.

A man and a woman standing side by side. They're in a restaurant to judge by the tables behind them, the dim presence of other people in the background. She wears a gorgeous green dress that glitters like it contains all the stars of the night sky. The dress is short and if you know to look for it—and I do—you can just make out the hint of the garter clips holding her stockings. Her arms are slender and bare, though there's a hint of muscle there, too. The straps over her naked shoulders are very thin, the neckline scooped low over a hint of cleavage. Earrings glint at her ears, her lips are red, and she has a very pretty blush to her cheeks. The man's arm is around her waist, palm resting flat just below the swell of her chest. His expression is very serious, but his cheeks are pink, too, with a happy flush. Despite the woman's heels, she only reaches the man's shoulder. The man wears a black blazer with a white shirt and dark blue tie. He's a large man, clearly muscular beneath his suit, and makes the girl look tiny in comparison.

I've studied this photograph often. Every time, my heart flutters like a bird in a cage. The picture tells its obvious story, that of a couple on a date. Possibly even their first date, judging by the effort the woman has put into her appearance. But also, there's an awkwardness to their pose, the slight flinch away from the man's hand, a hint of uncertainty to his eyes.

That's the story within the frame, but we all live outside that frame, and I know that although the picture doesn't lie, it's also reluctant to reveal all its secret. It's not obvious, for example, that this is in fact a picture of two men. Or perhaps it would be more accurate to say it's a picture of a man, and of a woman who doesn't know she is a woman, yet. Honestly, even from outside the frame, it's hard to say. What is clear is that despite the smile and effort put into his presentation, at the time, the man in the dress wears it unwillingly. He feels deeply mortified to be wearing a dress, even one as gorgeous and glittery as that green one. Meanwhile, the other man, for all his apparent pleasure in the girl's company, secretly wishes she were someone else.

I return the photograph to its place, continue my circuit of the small room. *My* room, though it doesn't quite feel right to call it so. My hand drifts over familiar surfaces. I touch the

wood bedframe, the comforter, the pillow. Despite the winter cold, the pale sun slanting through the window has left its touch and these surfaces are warm. Gary, our small, black cat lies curled up in a patch of light. His little nose is buried beneath the soft pads of his paw. I rest the urge to disturb his sleep. Instead, I allow my hand to linger across the hard surfaces that help delineate this new life. Memory drifts. I smile, and blush, to do so; my stomach tightens, a not uncomfortable feeling, to remember—and feel—the warmth of this bed.

Then, I move on to the closet. It's filled with clothes, dresses and skirts and tops, pants and shoes. Once, they were all hers; the first dress I ever wore was hers. Now, nearly half the clothes hanging there are mine. The green dress hangs there, on her side of the closet. But on this side, my favourite pair of jeans, a pair of women's Levis that actually fits and hugs my bum in a way that seems to compel him to give my ass a light slap, whenever I walk past. I blush, thinking of this, feel warmth blossom in my belly. But also, in the closet, the long blue maxi-dress, the first I ever bought; the short, pleated tartan skirt; the pale-yellow playsuit. There's also a few other items, a midnight black basque, a flimsy babydoll, a whisper of pink dangling from a hanger. I feel the fabric between finger and thumb and smile.

Finally, I return to the desk and sit. I rest my fingers over the keys.

Only now that I've finally gotten around to it, I don't know where to start. At the beginning, he said, in that super serious way of his, as if this was some profound insight. I had to hide my smile behind my hand, which he saw, of course, and frowned, now mock serious, and I gave him a little kiss to make up for it. Well, that led to other things, and it was quite some time before I got back to writing.

Start at the beginning, and the obvious start would be the day I met first met him. But that isn't the start, not *really*, and maybe it begins with the decision to drive north. Yet that only happened because of the fight with Chloe, triggered by that picture she posted online, but also Hargreaves chewing me out at work; and finding out she'd been cheating on me for all those months leading into Christmas. That's a good start, I guess—only, all *that* happened for reasons reaching all the way back to when I was a kid, to Tess and Dad and my mom, and by that time I'm like three years old, and who gives a shit about tragic backstory?

(I'd read that story, he says, when I show him this. I'd love to read that story. I give him a kiss on the cheek as a reward, but in this, his opinion doesn't count. He's biased.)

A nice, straightforward narrative, that's what people want, built on a solid foundation. None of this split-narrative bullshit, flashbacks and playing with form for its own sake. A clear story with a beginning, middle and an ending—preferably one following some kind of crisis, new love and a kiss under bright lights. That's what people want. A happy ending at Christmas.

Well, I don't know much about the rest, but I know a thing or two about foundations. Also, walls and rooms and everything else that goes into building a home, the kind of place in which a life can dwell. At least, I know the ideas behind it all. *He's* much better at the 'manly' work of practicality, at making things happen. After all, he made us happen. But then, my whole life's always been far more theory than reality.

My fingers rest gently over the keyboard. Burgundy nails shimmer in the winter sunlight. I chew my lower lip. Memories crowd forward but one leaps to the front.

This is your fault, she said. You goddamn coward.

Chapter One

Chloe's words repeat in Daniel's mind as he drives. He keeps a steady hand on the wheel. Leaving Toronto, the snow started with a few light flurries of fluttering flakes that shivered against the windscreen before being swept away by the wind. But with every passing hour and kilometre, the snow gathered strength and now it falls heavily, a white, rolling curtain obscuring the road and cars ahead. In the dark blues and purples of early evening, incoming headlights flare brightly, taillights scattering in ruby kaleidoscopes, and the snow out front swirls hypnotically.

She hadn't even taken the pictures down, that's what gets to him. Those pictures from her office Christmas party two weeks ago, and that guy's arm around her waist, and maybe that kind of thing happens, when people get drunk at a Christmas party, though that kind of thing never happens at *his* workplace, but it was the familiarity with which she leaned into that guy's arm, like it *belonged* there, with his hand resting possessively on her hip, and she belonged with him. First the picture, and then the confrontation, the argument, initial denials giving way to bitter insults, admission and finally, the breakup. Both picture and Chloe's mocking words roll through his thoughts for the entire journey north. He thinks about what he said and what he could have said, or should have said, or not have said. He thinks about the holiday they'd booked, and he paid for and which was now his, alone. He'd left Vaughan and rolled out onto the 400 North Corridor feeling doggedly optimistic, but joining the 11 at Barrie his mood had turned melancholic and now, approaching Powassan, sweat breaks out across his neck, alternating hot and cold, and his knuckles are white and his hand stiff from clenching the steering wheel for so long.

Snow crunches beneath the car's tires as he comes off the highway. The few houses by the side of the road, just beyond the tree line, are nearly invisible, just faint glimmers in the falling snow. At the stop sign, he scrapes at the buildup of frost on the inside of the windscreen. The car is old, and the heater doesn't work properly. Chloe kept telling him to ditch the car, he could afford to get a new one, but he had a fondness for the car, he'd had it since he was eighteen. Besides, it's not like he needs a car every day. Normally he commutes to work, catches a bus from home to VMC, then the TTC Line 1 southbound, getting off at Osgoode, and a short walk past city hall, the beautiful architecture, that tall, curved building. Just over an hour, door to door, and he's always enjoyed the commute, leaving earlier to avoid the worse of the crush. He reads his Kindle, listens to podcasts, looks out the window of bus or train and watches the quiet early morning passage of the city, there's something reassuring in the repetitive tedium, comfort in suburban blandness.

Besides, the only time they really needed a car was for the occasional visit to her parents, who live out of town. She's probably there now, with her parents, without him. This hurts him more than expected. Daniel liked Chloe's parents, especially her mom, Aubrey, who always treated him kindly, perhaps out of pity, but he didn't mind.

The only other need for a car was on days like this, for long drives to the ass end of butt-fuck nowhere. Daniel grips the steering wheel tight and leans forward and cranes his neck left and right to see if anything is coming. The snow falls in thick sheets. Easing slowly into the crossing, he turns left, across the bridge over the highway, the road below lost in the swirling darkness.

Following the satnav, he guides the car down the 534, two lanes and a solid yellow line winding through the darkness, headlights picking out the occasional house or road sign against a backdrop of forest on either side. Branches laden with snow droop and dip to the ground. Ploughs haven't come this way recently, and the snow lies heavily across the road. Daniel sticks to troughs made by earlier cars. These are filling quickly with new snow. He drives slowly, leaning close over the steering wheel. Leaving Toronto, he'd listened to the podcast 99% *Invisible*. That lasted until Orillia, at which point he switched over to music. Then, he listened to *The Tragically Hip* for most of the drive. Now, he drives in silence. The only sound is the slight whine of the heater and the *wip-wip* of the wipers, the wet patter of snow.

The car lurches, pulling against the rut running through the thick snow. His stomach tightens against the feeling of losing control. Breathing a little more heavily, he guides the car back into tracks carved out by previous vehicles. Everyone drives massive trucks up this way, their numbers steadily climbing the further he went from Toronto. His Honda Civic feels inadequate. He feels inadequate, too. Not for the first time, he wonders what the fuck he's doing here, what the hell he's doing and why is he even doing this, finding his way to some shitty northern Ontario backwater hick-town B&B, on his own?

He's running very late, he dithered before leaving, nearly changing his mind. Now, he regrets those early delays. Fortunately, it shouldn't be a problem checking in. The cabin's remote, one of a half-dozen little cottages scattered around a central lodge on the outskirts of Chippewa Bay. The resort sits on the lake, and the picture in the brochure, at least, looked stunning. Summer pictures of a blue lake glimmering, wood docks bleached sand-grey by the sun, with a single glass of white sparkling with captured sunlight on a low table next to a lounging chair. Winter pictures of Christmas trees dusted in snow, colourful lights, a loving couple in chunky sweaters wrapped warm in scarfs, holding hands. The perfect little Christmas escape, the perfect opportunity for a couple in desperate needs of some private time together. Doesn't it sound wonderful, Chloe said six months ago, insisting they book early before it sold out. Gorgeous, she said, and just think, it'll be just the two of us.

No, just me, he thinks. But now, he worries. Not about checking in. According to the booking e-mail, he just needs the code for a security box containing the keys. But the snow's getting worse and it's really dark now, and if there's a moon, he can't see it. He's hungry and needs to take a piss. He regrets the Timmy's he bought outside Huntsville. The coffee's curdled in his stomach. More time wasted, that stop. Also, he's never driven in snow like this, and according to Google Maps, he's still got an hour to go, some of it off the main road. Might as well be five hours, or a day, speed he's going. He considers whether he ought to pull over, wait it out. There had to be a gas station nearby, or maybe a late-night diner, it's not like he was that far into the boondocks, right?

Daniel hears Chloe's voice again, that final argument, God, it's so fucking boring, *you're* so fucking boring, always an excuse, she spat, you never finish anything. Another voice echoes hers: you messed up, Danny-boy, and it's Hargreaves' voice. I expected better. Maybe you should take some time off.

He blinks, gives his head a shake. No, better to keep going. He's almost there, and better to spend the night in a warm bed. He drives on. The road is dark and silent. Even the voices in his head have grown quiet. The dashboard glows red. He's very tired. He gives his head another shake. Snow spirals, bright white against heavy black. His head nods. The road ahead, and

behind, and the trees lining the side, the very air itself swirls and blanches and the world briefly disappears.

With a jerk, he starts awake, incoming headlights bright and blinding. His hands clamp down on the wheel. He twists sharply, instinctively, snow crunching beneath the tires, and he feels the rear end of the car slide out. The car's going fast, way too fast. Fuck, he thinks, fuck, no. The other car flies past, blaring its horn. He steers back into the road, too hard. He slams on the brakes. The car judders, ABS kicking in. There's ice under the snow. He throws the car in the other direction, over-compensates. Now the rear really does swing out. There's a brief sensation of weightlessness, and his stomach drops, he's aware of shouting out, something stupid—just, No! and again, no!—and the thought flashes across his mind, *not like this!*—the car spins out, and there's a flash of blinking lights, bright and colourful, and trees, sudden looming white, and then the car careens off the road, across a ditch, the front suddenly horribly dropping, rear end flipping high—and then a crunching stop, passenger door slamming into a tree.

Daniel's head snaps sideways, clips the steering wheel with a loud crack. Everything's white—as white as the snow outside the car—and he feels himself falling, falling, as light shatters and gives way to darkness.

He dreams, unexpectedly, of his mother. Her name is Emily. He dreams of her as she was, then, when he was only three years old. In the way of dreams, he can't quite make her out entirely but knows without any doubt that it is her. Brown hair in soft waves, and eyes to match, gentle but also distant. Her lips are pink, forming a small, sad little smile. I love you, she says. You're too small to understand, but I *do* love you.

I'm *not* too small, he insists.

She kneels next to him, touches the side of his face with her fingertips, with the back of her hand. My beautiful baby boy, she says. I'm sorry, so very sorry. But I'm not strong enough. And she's right, he doesn't understand, because she is his mother, and along with his father the strongest people he knows, the pillars on which his life is built.

Mom? In the dream, she turns away from him and begins to fade.

She glances back over her shoulder, smiles wistfully, and holds up a dress, a little girl's party dress, white with sparkles, and pink trim, with a large flouncy bow at the back. I could stay, she says, if you wore this for me, maybe? Would you do that for me?

"Mom!"

His voice hurts, his throat dry. Wincing, he cracks an eye open. The pale light of early afternoon falls across the room. He closes his eye and groans. Daniel throws an arm across his face. He takes a few, deep breaths, searching for a memory of something just beyond his reach. It occurs to him that something isn't right. He is vaguely aware of a dull ache across his chest and neck. Grudgingly, he opens his eyes again.

Sudden and intense pain, white hot and stabbing, pierces his temple, somewhere just behind his right eye, a searing lance that curdles his gut. He squeezes his eyes shut, claps his left hand to his face, palm flat, and whimpers. The pain is nearly unbearable. He's never felt anything like this before. Sweat breaks out across his brow, his neck is wet with it, but he feels cold, writhing and twisting with his legs tangled in bedsheets. With his left hand, he flails about,

finds the wooden frame of the headboard, and latches on to it like a drowning man to a life preserver.

Just as quickly as it came, the pain fades. Daniel takes a shuddering breath. Gradually, he relaxes but the memory of pain leaves him on edge. Eventually, he dares to open his eyes again. He stares up at an unfamiliar ceiling, white stucco, trimmed in pale pink. The pain stays at bay, present but subdued. Then, the drive comes back to him: the falling snow, the flash of headlights, the vertiginous swing of the backend of the car and the sudden, looming tree. After that—nothing.

Shit, he thinks, and groans, sinking deeper into the bed. I crashed the car. Chloe was right, I'm such a loser. I fucked up. Again.

Then he blinks, at the sensation of cotton sheets and the plush comforter over him, downy pillow beneath his head. He's lying in a bed in a room he doesn't recognize. With a start, he shoots upright. There's a warning throb in his temple. He winces in anticipation. And it hurts, but not like before, a few dull, hot, eye-watering throbs before fading. He sighs with relief.

The room is unmistakably a woman's, one with a foot still firmly planted in her childhood. Pale pink lightened the room, and the long wall opposite the windows is done in wallpaper. The wallpaper presents an elaborate scene of vibrant foliage and a sparkling sky, shifting from dawn brilliance at one end to darkening twilight at the other. Mythic creatures and intricately coloured birds of paradise frolic amongst the flowers, and stranger and darker creatures lurk among the vines coiled near the floor. The floor is hardwood and covered in a thick rug that leaves the edges of the room, and the heating vents, unobstructed. The rug is pale rose, trimmed in darker pink, decorated with an abstract pattern in a rainbow of colours.

In one corner sits a heavy oak dresser and next to it, a small bookshelf packed with rows of thick, glossy novels, of a sort he frequently heard Chloe deride as infantile fantasy trash. A scattering of stuffed toys lines the footboard of the double bed where he now sits upright. In the opposite corner sits a small wooden vanity with a tri-mirror and a cushioned stool. Over it, a pegboard is crammed with photos, and next to the photos hangs a framed poster. The poster is an illustration from *The Little Prince*. The young boy stands alone in the desert, looking up at the night sky. The sky is punctured by a few dim stars, and the boy's face is wistful.

Large windows on two sides flood the space with weak, wintry light. In that corner sits an easel with what appears to be an unfinished painting of a sunset scene. At the foot of the bed, near the door, sits two suitcases. They are his suitcases, and the clothes he'd worn for the drive to Chippewa Bay—jeans and a faded t-shirt with a sketch of a moose set against a large triangle, labelled 'hypothemoose'—sit folded precisely over them.

It takes a moment for that to sink in. At the sight of his clothes, his head throbs painfully. Black spots dance before his eyes for a moment, then eases. Looking down, he sees he's wearing some kind of long cotton nightshirt, over his normal boxers, one that's long enough to reach mid-thigh, with a wide scoop neck hanging off one shoulder. It's a woman's nightie, the kind Chloe used to wear, but fitted to the contour of his body, and pale pink, decorated with cartoon drawing of black cats in different poses. Chloe would've never worn something this—girly. Daniel blinks dumbly at the clothes, holding it out from his body. It's cute, he likes it, though not on him.

What the hell, he thinks, why am I wearing this? He swings his legs out of bed. He pauses, wincing in anticipation, then stands. Daniel sighs with relief. The earlier pain is gone. Or rather, the pain in his head; the ache across chest and neck remain. A little woozy, he steadies himself with the headboard until the dizziness passes. Movement out of the corner of his eye catches his attention, and he turns, sees a full-length mirror by the dresser. In it, he sees himself.

The first thing he notices is the dressing over his temple. A square bandage rests centred over a dark bruise. Black and blue tendrils snake out past the edges. As far as Daniel can tell, the dressing has been expertly applied. Pushing back a tangle of dark hair, he prods lightly at the bruise. The skin feels raw and sensitive. He also notices the bruising across his neck, disappearing beneath the scoop neck of the nightie.

He hates how effeminate the oversized shirt makes him look. The way the neckline emphasizes his bare shoulder is vaguely humiliating in a way he can't quite pin down. He's always been short and slim. The way the shirt falls to his thighs and the way his bare legs stick out, the pale roundness of his shoulder, it twists his stomach uncomfortably. Grimacing, he's about to take the shirt off when there's a heavy knock at the door.

"Knock, knock," a deep, male voice rumbles.

The man who enters the room is a study in contrast with Daniel; at least, that's Daniel's impression the instant he sees the other man. He's possibly one of the largest men he's ever met in real life. He's very good-looking, too, with a well-trimmed beard and long hair tied back in a loose ponytail. Both hair and beard are rust-coloured, with a few streaks of grey. Placid, expressive eyes watch him with curiosity. The man radiates a calm, confident masculinity, one that makes Daniel acutely aware of the nightie and the way the trailing hem skirts his thighs, and of the way one slender shoulder is left bare by the oversized neckline.

An awkward silence falls between them. An unexpected blush rises in the other man's cheeks, perhaps embarrassment for Daniel, left standing awkwardly in unfamiliar clothing in a strange room. Meanwhile, Daniel feels an intense, almost crippling mortification at being seen this way, his hands twisting in the fabric of the night shirt. Almost immediately, his shame—and fear, he realises—turns to anger.

"Hey, my name's—" the large man says, entering the room; and at the same time Daniel lashes out, "What the hell's going on here?" but stepping back, releasing the shirt, hands curling into fists.

"Galen." The man stops just beyond the threshold of the room. He stands well over six feet tall, with broad shoulders and a wide chest, dressed in relaxed jeans and a plaid, flannel shirt. He appears to be in his thirties, though there's something older in his eyes. He pauses, then shrugs. He speaks slowly. "Sorry."

"Where am I? And why am I wearing this?" Daniel speaks louder than he intends, pulls at the nightie, staring up at Galen. He feels the difference in height between them. He's always resented his shortness, felt insecure because of it. Now, that insecurity feeds into febrile anger simmering across the surface of hollow fear. This man could take him without breaking a sweat, to look at him, probably toss him over one shoulder like a child, have him over his knee for a spanking for speaking so rudely to him. But Daniel can't bring himself to calm down, filled with resentment and self-doubt.

But Galen seems unfazed. He nods, once, as if understanding. He prods the suitcases by the door with one foot. The flush in his cheeks has faded, only now he seems genuinely sorry. "I didn't want to go through your stuff," he explains. "And—it was the only thing I could find that fit. After I took care of your wounds—"

"You did this?" Daniel touches the injury at his temple.

"You were unconscious. In your car," he explains. "Bleeding. You don't want to mess around with head injuries. After I got you out, I carried you in here and—"

"Why didn't you call an ambulance?"

Galen grinned ruefully. "Have you looked outside?"

Outside, the world is a solid blanket of rolling white, gleaming in the pale sun. The road itself is indistinguishable from the land on either side, with soft waves of snow covering everything. Only the trees on either side, branches heavy and drooping, delineating the road. Near the house, there's a rounded mound at the base of a tree, vaguely the size and shape of his car. Daniel stares through the window for some time, even as more snow continues to gently but steadily fall, great big wet flakes that cling to everything. Already, ice is beginning to form over surfaces, and a streetlight opposite glows into life in the fading light, nearly invisible behind its veil of falling snow. Daniel touches his hand to the window and feels the coolness of the glass, and his anger fades.

"Holy shit, it's really coming down, isn't it?"

The other man—Galen, was it?—steps up to the window, and Daniel notices a slight limp in the way he walks. "Haven't seen it this heavy in years." His voice is deep, comforting, and slow, and for some reason makes Daniel think of the snowbanks outside.

Daniel looks up at him. "What happened?"

He'd just sat down with a good book and a glass of scotch, Galen explains, when headlights flashed through his windows. Blaring horn, then a moment later he heard the crash, the crunch of metal. When he rushed outside, he found the car with its passenger side door crumpled against one of the trees out front.

"Didn't get to read much last night. As for the scotch," he adds, smiling ruefully. "It's still waiting."

The snow continue to fall fast and heavy, the temperature dropping, as he reached the car. Working quickly but carefully, he checked Daniel for any obvious injuries to his neck, and then deciding the risk from exposure was worse than the risk of spinal injury, extracted him from the car and carried him upstairs.

"You carried me?"

"I've carried heavier." He indicates the man's torso. "I'm sure you've noticed, there's some bruising where the seatbelt caught you, some minor abrasions but otherwise you seem okay. You got lucky. Except for that nasty bump there. I cleaned and dressed it and then—" he shrugs. "Well, like I said. I didn't want to go rooting through your stuff, these clothes were on hand, so I just grabbed one of—" He hesitates, and his face clouds over, and for a moment he doesn't speak. Eventually he forces a smile. "I grabbed the first thing that looked like it would fit and got you into the bed. Sorry if it's a bit girly."

Feeling bad about his earlier outburst, ungrateful and needlessly insecure, Daniel's ears grow hot, his cheeks too. It's not like he could've worn Galen's clothes, he would've drowned in them. "It's—fine," he says, fingering the nightie's fabric between finger and thumb. "I mean, thank you. For rescuing me."

Galen grunts. "Anyway. After that, I grabbed that chair over there and my book and hung out for a bit. Well, it's not a good idea to leave a guy with a head injury alone. You slept through the night okay, just a bit of tossing and turning with the morning." Only then does Daniel notice that the other man looks tired, too, eyes rimmed with red and the face beneath his beard a little pale.

"Shit, I mean, I'm sorry, really. I'll—I don't know, make it up to you, somehow. Promise."

Galen waves it off. "Hey, no worries, buddy. Truth is, it doesn't look like either of us are going anywhere anytime soon. That snow's not looking to let up."

As though confirming his words, snow patters against the window, wet flakes piling up against the windowsill. Outside, a strong wind blows, and he hears a faint whistle through the wall.

Daniel sits heavily on the edge of the bed. Ever since Tess—and the stuff with Dad—these past few months, everything's gone wrong. First, the fuck up at work, the reaming by Hargreaves, enforced leave and the shame, the pitying looks from colleagues. Then, Chloe, those pictures, the argument and breakup.

He needed to get away. This trip is supposed to be his escape from all that. A chance to—honestly, he has no idea—rediscover who he is and what matters to him. Instead, he's crashed the car and is snowed in at some stranger's house. His head throbs and his body aches. He feels it well up inside him, all the frustration and fear and bad memories, rising inexorably. In a moment, he's going to cry, and how fucking embarrassing would *that* be?

Maybe Galen notices something, he can't tell. But the large man steps away. "Hey, listen, while that snow's coming down, nobody's going anywhere. I don't mind you crashing here for a few days until the roads are cleared. Honestly. This room—" and here the man stops, smiles weakly. "Nobody's using it right now."

"So, make yourself at home. Bathroom's through there," and Galen tapped the wall with the forest-scene wallpaper, and for the first time Daniel notices the door, cunningly hidden within the intricate design. "Take your time, settle in, unpack if you want. I'll head downstairs, see if I can rustle up some food. You must be starving. Come down when you're ready."

Hearing it, Daniel realises that he is, in fact, famished. His stomach rumbles loudly, and he winces. Galen laughs, and then leaves, closing the bedroom door behind him.

For some time, Daniel simply sits there, alone. The injury to his head remains a dull, quiet presence. The wind rises and falls, giving no indication of easing off any time soon. It grows a little darker, the sky outside the window shifting into the purples of early evening. Eventually, he sighs and stands. His forehead gives a warning throb. His body aches, tight across chest and neck. But otherwise, he feels okay. But he doesn't know what to do next. He feels at a loss. The plan had been an easy one. Drive to Chippewa Bay, check in at the Lodge, and then—

He grimaces. He has no idea what “and then” was going to be. This whole thing was a ridiculous impulse driven by bitterness and an all too familiar desire to escape. And where had that led him? Trapped, in some stranger’s house in the middle of nowhere. Christ, the size of that man. Still, he owes him. He could’ve died out there, in the cold. The truth of that suddenly hits him, hard. He could’ve *died* out there, unconscious in his car, the cold slowly creeping in, slowing his blood, his breathing, until life fled leaving behind a corpse, preserved under a blanket of snow.

How long, he wondered, before anyone even noticed?

Daniel grips his knees tightly, aware once again of the ridiculous nightie he’s wearing. Ridiculous, but undeniably cozy and cute. He likes the cats; over their three years together, it was a constant low-level argument between Chloe and himself: he wanted to get a cat, like the one he had growing up, and she didn’t. As always, she got her way.

Sighing, he heaves his two suitcases onto the bed. He retrieves a change of clothes: Levis, vintage *Arcade Fire* t-shirt, a blue hoodie and Fatface boxer-briefs and a pair of socks, black with a diamond pattern. He pauses, then. Make yourself at home, the guy said. If he’s going to be here a couple of days, he might as well unpack, right? It’s not like he’s got that much, and there’s no point living out of a suitcase. But when he checks out the dresser, and opens the top first drawer, and then the next, he finds them already full.

There’s one small drawer filled with rows of panties and bunched pantyhose, some of them patterned, one of them fishnets. The next drawer is laid out with bras. The collection of underwear is all bright colours and cute designs, polka dots, flowers, lace trimming, pastels, pinks and peaches, even a few more black cats, stretching indolently across the cups of a pale blue bra. Most of Chloe’s bras and panties are functional, daily-wear work stuff, three-to-a-pack basic cotton and black, grey or white. These are definitely girly, very cute and pretty, and he feels a pang of envy for the man lucky enough to—have a girl who wears these clothes.

After a long pause, Daniel closes the drawer and looks through the others, finding folded t-shirts and sweaters in one, a few pairs of jeans in another, and finally one full of long nighties not dissimilar to the one he wears, though it strikes him that his is by far the cutest and most feminine. Of the two bottommost drawers, one is empty, but the other raises a small blush to his cheeks. He finds a pale pink corset-type item, lying flat with dangling garters, and another bundle of straps and buckles, some kind of harness, he’s not sure. There’s a gauzy babydoll, red with fluffy white trimming, and some kind of long negligee-type item, a shiny forest green with the thinnest of shoulder straps. Pairs of rolled stockings line the back, midnight black, ivory white, deep crimson, light pink.

To his embarrassment, Daniel feels himself growing aroused, looking at these items. He lightly dabbles his fingertips across the long negligee, it’s cool and silky to the touch. He traces the boning of the corset and the buckles on the harness. He thinks of Chloe and how, early in their relationship, she’d wear stuff like this for him, but it’s been at least a full year since he can remember her putting on anything overtly sexy. At first, she found it fun, delightfully naughty. Soon after, she complained it was uncomfortable and then, that she didn’t like feeling objectified, questioned why her naked body wasn’t enough for him. And he hadn’t wanted to objectify her, make her feel uncomfortable, but at the same time felt guilty excitement at seeing her on display for his pleasure, lacy lingerie and garter belt and stockings, embodying some patriarchal fantasy no doubt accrued from years of sexist media.

Those sexy items eventually found their way to a bottom drawer, shoved to the back, covered by old sweaters, and forgotten. He never pushed her, but he wondered: is it really so bad, being objectified, within the confines of the bedroom, and for a time being reduced to a sexy—*thing*, enticing and arousing? On display and cherished, and desired, not for ideas or complexities of emotion and thought, but purely for the ability to enflame passion? Yes—to simply be a source of erotic—fun, for a single night, even an hour, less, the length of a fuck.

Were the positions reversed, he feels, if it were allowable, he would have loved nothing more than to put himself on display for her and raise in her the same excitement that she brought him. He imagines then garters pulling tight against her thighs with dark stockings and high heels, panties cut high on her hips and threaded between her ass, breasts pushed up and full in a lacy demi-bra, a hint of exposed, erect nipple, on all fours on their bed, half-lidded eyes and wet lips, that lustful look, and shudders, and feels sad, knowing he'll never see her that way again.

Blushing, he quickly closes the drawer, and in the empty one next to it, unloads his first suitcase, mostly underwear, white undershirts, a few long-sleeved tops. Job done, he takes his empty suitcase and stows it in the closet. The closet is half full, with an array of dresses and skirts, a couple pair of pants and a half dozen shirts. Again, the colours and patterns are overtly feminine, a few retro flourishes, very pretty but nothing corporate, nothing to suggest a young woman with a foot in the working world, or at least, the working world he's familiar with. He passes his hand over the hanging dresses, and comes away with a lingering smell, slightly floral, a girl's smell, but faint and faded.

He shuts the door, sits on the edge of the bed. Who is she, Daniel wonders, the girl who lives in this room? Or lived, he amends. Everything is neatly arrayed and ordered, but somehow conveyed a sense of—stillness; and behind the floral scent there's something faintly stale, maybe even musty, clinging to everything. It suggests someone absent. His sister, maybe? Surely not an ex-girlfriend. Maybe his wife? But the bed is a single, and there's nothing to suggest a male presence in this room. So that doesn't track, either: this is clearly a woman's room.

And whoever she is, he's wearing her clothes, he realizes, and filled with disgust, he stands to remove the nightie. He glimpses himself in the mirror and hesitates. He smiles, awkwardly, to see himself, still filled with shame but also able to admit, somewhat grudgingly, that the oversized t-shirt fits him, it's cute and cozy, if somewhat embarrassing, his naked thighs and exposed shoulder. He must be roughly the same size as her, this missing girl, or at least her height.

With a sigh, he takes the nightie by the hem and pulls it up over his head.

Almost instantly, crippling pain stabs through his temple, hot and piercing and directly behind his right eye. His bowels turn to water and his legs give out beneath him and then he crumples to the floor, clutching his head with both hands, and can't see, everything's just a white haze. He scrabbles at the rug, wordlessly, beyond words, throat clenched tight. His hand closes around the discarded nightie, clutches it close, like a child gripping a favourite toy out of fear and need. The pain eases, slightly. Daniel gapes, whimpers, buries his face in the woman's shirt. His breath comes in shuddering gulps. Some lingering fragments of the girl's scent reaches him. He feels the soft cotton. He remembers the cozy feel of the fabric, the pleasing pinkness of it, the cute, frolicking black cats. His injury throbs and aches but the overall pain

lessens. Some instinct drives him to pull the nightie back on, and he wriggles into it, yanking it down over his trembling frame.

Just as quickly as it swelled, the pain ebbs, and Daniel is left sitting on the floor, bathed in sweat, breathing heavily. What the fuck, he thinks. What the fuck just happened?

Chapter Two

“Hey, I was starting to wonder if you’d passed out up there,” Galen says, as Daniel joins him downstairs.

The man’s house is small but cozy, wood cabin aesthetic with an open design ground floor. Daniel can’t help casting an approving, professional eye across what he sees, and what he sees, he likes. He’s always had a bias towards clean, modern lines, and somewhat cold, contemporary designs, neutral colours and exposed brick and concrete, glass and sleek curves: but this is nice, too, it belongs to a world where snow piles up to the window and a fire in the stove keeps the cold at bay.

“Sorry.” He moves a little uneasily, unsure where to stand, and how to make it look natural. He’s wearing his jeans and t-shirt, and favourite dark blue hoodie. Despite this, he feels exposed, as if his clothes, baggy as they are, aren’t enough to hide his secret.

Galen stands by a small stove, silhouetted against a pair of windows looking out over white trees and the sky, an intensely deep blue darkening to purple at the horizon, glimpsed through flurries of swirling snow. What he sees of the sky is punctuated by a few solitary, bright stars. There’s a rear door next to what appears to be a passage into some kind of pantry or storage, and the kitchen itself is divided from the rest of the living space by a counter, a slab of polished wood over slotted stands holding plates, pots and pans. The man carries a bowl of soup from the stovetop, licks of steam curling into the air. He leaves it at a table near the middle of the room. “Grab a seat,” he offers. “I’ve already eaten.” He smiles apologetically. “It’s nothing special, I’m afraid. Just a bit of Lipton chicken noodle, a slice of pumpernickel. The butter’s good, though, nice and creamy. From a farm up the road.” He shrugs. “I’m not much of a cook.”

Daniel’s stomach twists in a tight, nervous knot, but he’s reminded of his hunger and his mouth waters at the thought of food. He walks over to the table, eying Galen nervously. Can he tell? There’s no way he could. But every step feels strange; not uncomfortable, just different, and Daniel feels acutely aware of these differences. He plucks at the seat of his jeans, gives his head a shake, and sits.

“Coffee?” Galen asks.

It’s a bit late for coffee, but Daniel nods.

After recovering from the pain upstairs, Daniel tried removing the nightie again. He got as far as rolling it up to his neck before the anticipation of what must follow stopped him. His bruised temple pulsed hotly, a premonition of pain shuddered down his spine, and his neck broke out in sweat. Instead, he let the shirt fall once more and after a long moment, struggled to his feet. The memory of the earlier agony left him pale and trembling. What the hell was wrong with him? He walked the length of the room slowly, back and forth, prodding very gently at his injured temple. He stood at the window and stared out across the growing darkness. The snow shone and icicles in the window sparkled as lights at the front of the house came on.

He didn’t know what to do. Eventually, he returned to the dresser. He opened his drawer and retrieved a t-shirt. Pulling it down over the nightie brought a twinge of discomfort but nothing more. But when he went to remove both nightie and t-shirt at the same time, his eyes watered and his temple grew hot. He gave up. Instead, with his head aching, he opened the top drawer. Simply gazing across the rows of colourful panties cooled his brow and eased his pain. Responding to a sudden instinct, he reached into the drawer and blindly grabbed a pair. Shaking

slightly, he stepped into them. They were all twisted around his ankle. It took him a trembling moment to right them. Then, he pulled the panties up his legs. The sickening sense of wrongness at wearing some unknown woman's underwear in a stranger's house was nothing compared to the wrenching pain he'd felt earlier. Quite the opposite: as he fumbled the panties into place, pain gave way to something altogether unexpected, a fleeting, fluttering joy that tingled up his spine and then faded like a whisper on the wind.

Now, sitting in the kitchen, Daniel squirms in his seat. It just had to be a thong, he thinks, hyperaware of the fabric threading his ass, and the tightness across his crotch. He feels a desperate need to reach down the front of his jeans and adjust himself. A discomforting half-arousal haunts him, as he strains against the embroidered front of his underwear. Delicate lace tickles his thighs.

Once he had them on, he examined his pick, standing with his face hot and burning red in front of the full-length mirror. The panties were a dainty lilac and polka mesh, sparkling with little diamantes and decorated with a butterfly pattern. They hugged his hips, and his compressed genitals pushed the front out obscenely. He remembered seeing a matching bra in the other drawer. God, he would have loved to see his ex-girlfriend wear something like this—the idea itself arousing, and he pushed the thought down, and filled with embarrassment he pulled his jeans on over the delicate, beautiful panties. But the underwear did the trick: he put on the rest of his clothes without incident, and the pain in his temple remained quiescent.

Now, slurping hungrily at chicken soup and nibbling on a slice of heavy black bread, slathered in rich butter, he considers his situation. As far as he can tell, something must have happened in the crash. He hit his head; and the impact—what, damaged his brain somehow?

He's heard of things like this before, or at least he thinks he has. It's like something from an episode of *House*, or the kind of topic maybe covered in a podcast, *Hi Phi Nation* or *Radiolab*, the sort he listens to on the way to work. Besides, weird shit happens all the time, right? Like, there were all those people after COVID, losing their appetite for once-favourite foods. Or that one woman, a tragic case, nearly died because everything she ate suddenly tasted like rotting meat. And wasn't there a story of some guy who took a hit to the head and woke up able to speak French? Or maybe it was German. He thinks he read that somewhere online, probably Reddit. Doesn't matter. And back in high school, one teacher, Ms Fletcher maybe, showed a Youtube video, that story of a guy who took a blasting rod right through his skull, a chunk of his brain ended up in the doctor's cup of tea. Gross, but the guy lived, though his personality changed, angry, and mean.

After all, there's all sorts of weird conditions, too, like a woman he thinks he heard about once, sensitive to light, a walk outside could kill her, a touch of sunlight blistering the skin. The human body never ceases to amaze in its ability to fuck up in new and exciting ways. Even more mundane things like nut allergies can change over time, ease off or double in potency. His sister used to be lactose intolerant, crippling pain and hot flashes as a teenager, and now she takes great pleasure in gobbling down a whole block of cheese with nothing worse than bad breath an hour later. Who can say why any of this weird shit happens?

But then, he's never heard of something like this. It doesn't make sense, it's an offense to his reason. How would the injury know, for one? How would a bump on the brain decide which clothes are male or female? Fashion's just socially determined bullshit, after all, there's no objective standpoint from which a skirt is inherently female, or high heels the domain of

women. Heels derived from cavalry boots, and throughout history men have worn skirts, kilts, long robes and those are dresses-adjacent, at the very least, makeup too, Egyptians, Celts, whatever. That's not even Feminism 101, it's just history, everybody knows that. And therefore, how can there be anything inherently female about an oversized t-shirt in pink with cute cartoon cats on it?

Yet at the same time, he knows it's the essential femininity of the top that holds back the pain in his head. He's never had a migraine before. Chloe used to get them. He'd find her hiding under the comforter in the bedroom in the dark, whimpering for the pain, snapping at him to fuck off if he got too close. There were women at work who regularly missed a day here and there for the same reason. At some level he used to resent them for that. People always joked of man-flu, but it's not like he ever took a day off. And these women miss all kinds of days, for migraines, that time of the month, whatever. It's not fair.

He gives his head a shake. He's losing the thread of his thoughts. That's right, pain: and now, Daniel feels newfound sympathy for those colleagues of his. If what they felt was even a shadow of the agony he experienced earlier, he gets it now, he really does, he thinks.

Still. It's just so stupid! A bump on the head forcing him to wear women's clothing? What next, lesions to wear lingerie, bruises for a bra, contusion for a corset, hurting for heels? It's insane. Ridiculous. And yet, the pain he experienced was the single most debilitating thing he's ever felt, so intense that even the memory of it makes his stomach clench tight and his breath catch in his throat.

"Hey buddy, you okay there?" Galen's voice cuts through his reverie. He stands measuring spoonfuls of coffee grind into a squat, dull metal percolator set on the stove. "You're a thousand miles away."

Daniel forces a weak smile. "Sorry." He taps lightly at his forehead. "Was just thinking about this."

Galen twists a dial on the stove, and blue flame hisses to life beneath the coffee maker. He grabs a chair and joins Daniel at the table. "How's it feeling?"

Suppressing a hysterical laugh, Daniel forces a shrug. "Not too bad. It hurts. Not, like, a sharp pain right now. More a dull ache. Though it flares up sometimes." Like when I try to take off these panties, he doesn't say.

"Yeah, it looked nasty, to be sure. You've probably got a mild concussion. You should probably take it easy for the next few days." Then, Galen leans back in his chair and laughs. "Like we've got a choice, eh? Weather like this, best thing to do is hunker down and wait it out."

"You sure you don't mind me being around?" Daniel forces a wan smile, squirms a little in his chair. "Like, I don't want to intrude?"

The question was asked lightly, but Galen takes it with unexpected seriousness. He frowns with thought, heavy fingers drumming against the table. "You know, it's funny." He speaks slowly, as if considering each word before voicing it. "If you'd asked me that question a few days ago, I would've said, sorry buddy, we're full up. I'd gone to town, stocked up for the holidays and frankly, was ready to hibernate, if you get my drift, I was looking forward to being on my own." He frowns, opens his mouth, shuts it and furrows his brow and when he next speaks, there's a strain to his voice. "And I suppose we could still jump on the skidoo and I could get you

into town, there's a motel not too far distant. It'd be a bit of a rough ride, though and frankly, in your condition, with that bump on your head, I couldn't in good conscience do it."

When he continues, he's staring into the distance, not really talking to Daniel at all. Wide windows make up the front of the house, the view looking out over fields across the road. It's nearly dark outside, but still visible through the falling snow is the way the land gives way to a lightly forested valley, rolling down into hidden depths before rising in the distance, craggy Canadian shield rock dotted with stalwart trees heavy with snow. It's a beautiful view, both lonely and serene.

"This was going to be my first Christmas," Galen continues, "the first one on my own in—years, and I was looking forward to it. Or I thought I was. I've always been a bit of a loner, truth be told. Plan was, I'd take a few long walks in the woods, check in on the trees, get some work done around the property. There are fences that need mending. And I've got a to-read pile of books like you wouldn't believe. But instead—yesterday—I barely did anything."

Galen's voice is sonorous, thoughtful and slow. It's a wonderfully easy voice to follow, along resonant dips and rises, and in listening to the other man's voice, Daniel finds himself willingly distracted from the dull ache in his head. "I was waiting," Galen continues. "I didn't know what for." He chuckles. "For you, maybe? But there I was, listening out for a knock at the door and walking over to the window every time a car drove past. Which doesn't happen very often out here, as you can imagine. And I kept expecting the phone to ring." He taps his cell phone, face-down on the table. "Well, maybe not the phone, snow seems to have knocked those out. Landline's still working though."

The percolator begins to blip, steam puffing from its spout. Galen stands, grabs a pair of mugs from beneath the counter and carries them over to the stove. He turns off the stove and carries the coffee over to the mugs. Every act is deliberate, he moves with a slow, quiet surety that Daniel wishes he could emulate. "What about you," he asks, focused on the pouring out the coffee, "what's your story? I'm guessing you're not from around here."

Daniel nods, as the hot drink is placed in front of him. He notes again the sheer size of the man, his height and broad chest. Galen's shirt cuffs are rolled back, and his forearms are roped with muscle. There's a tattoo there, some kind of insignia, sabres and a motto, that he doesn't recognize. "Milk, sugar?" he asks, opening a cabinet by the stove. Both, Dan answers, and then Galen sits again, taking his coffee black. "So?"

"I'm up from Toronto. I live in Vaughan." Daniel hesitates. "Actually, I *lived* in Vaughan, past tense. I mean, I'm still there. But I'll have to move when I get back. Probably. I broke up with my girlfriend last week. I mean, we share a condo. And I don't think we'll be able to patch things up. So... yeah, *lived*." He takes a deep breath, hides a grimace behind a sip of coffee. Even with milk and two sugars, the coffee's stronger than he's used to. Maybe the grind needs a dash of salt, something to ease the bitterness. It hits his stomach hard, and he feels it churn. Maybe it's simply voicing the reality that his relationship with Chloe is over, it's not something he's said out loud before. Or maybe he's just nervous, and he shifts in his seat, feeling the scrap of satin pull between his bum cheeks.

"But we had this, uh, so we had this booking, right, at a place? Um, the Lodge, in Chippewa Bay? Booked it months ago. Booked it in my name, I paid for it. And—I thought, you know, why let it go to waste?" He feels as though he's babbling, his cheeks feel hot and his stomach tight, and he can't seem to stop squirming in his seat. "I mean, it was her idea, she

found it online, read the reviews. I didn't want to, I mean, I was really busy at the time, it looked nice but did we need it? But she convinced me we should, like, that we needed some time away from—everything, I guess, time together to just, I don't know. Talk?" Daniel takes a deep breath to say more, then lets it out loudly instead. "Yeah. So that's why I'm here."

Galen simply nods, placid eyes unblinking, watching and listening patiently.

And Daniel means to stop there, doesn't want to talk about any of this, especially with a stranger, especially when he's wearing some woman's panties, but something in the man's quiet, calm demeanour compels him to continue. "And the thing is, well, I was fired, you see, from my job. Well, not fired, not quite that, more put out on leave, forced to take a stress break because, well, because I lost it at work, last month, just sort of snapped after—well, after I fucked up, I guess, it wasn't my fault, but also it was, I can own that. But also, I'd been working back-to-back sixty-hour weeks, it was fucking crazy and Hargreaves was riding me hard, and—then some other stuff happened—and I made a mistake, and he, like, reamed me out in front of everyone, and I just lost it, I just totally lost it, in the office. And after that, he took me aside, told me to take a break. I'm scheduled for a sit down to talk about my future with the firm in the new year."

He's almost out of breath once he stops. He hasn't said any of this out loud before, or at least not all of it, not in one go. Fragments, shared with his sister via text; a few details with Chloe, before the breakup, but he told her he was taking time off work, that he needed a break, and not that he'd been suspended from his job. Now, Daniel finds he's staring at the table, hands gripping his knees so tightly the knuckles are white. He finds he lacks the strength to raise his gaze and meet the other man's eyes.

"Sorry," he says.

There's a lengthy pause, and then Galen asks, sounding unperturbed, "what do you do?"

"Junior architect," Daniel answers. "At a firm downtown, Hargreaves and Associates. We mostly do commercial stuff, a few government projects, maybe a domestic on the side, but that's rare." Which has always annoyed him; he prefers the domestic work, designing a space in which life can take root, a family can blossom and grow. "Well, it's what I used to do, anyway. Who knows, come January."

Galen gives a non-committal rumble in his throat. "I know the Lodge. John and Sarah are good people. They'll take good care of you. And there's some fantastic walks down by the lake. I'll give them a call later on the landline, let them know where you're at, they'll be worried." He drinks his coffee, and Daniel does, too. Then, he asks, "this girl of yours, what happened?"

Daniel stares into his cup. He can't blame the guy for asking, he mentioned it first, after all. But the truth of it is embarrassing; she dumped him, and it hurts, and how the hell did it come to pass that he's sat opposite some stranger, pouring his heart out like this? And when he opens his mouth to answer, nothing comes out for the shame, the humiliation of it.

Four years he was together with Chloe, they met during his last year of university. That exciting, challenging first year in the real world, tentative early steps into adult life. Dating, then moving in together, their first apartment, a tiny little place over a pizza joint that constantly smelled of baking dough, and neon lights burned bright outside their front window and flooded the living room in crimson.

God, though, they had fun back then, living right on top of each other, barely scraping by, spending most nights in, cuddled together on the sofa, watching TV or playing games. Sex, too, and those were the days when she might still dress up for him, or go down on him, and allow him to dribble honey over her breasts, and lick it off, or let him blindfold her and tie her arms to the bedpost and tickle her feet, or behind the knee, or gently circle her breasts with a feather, lightly brush the nipple, and make her hiss, squirm and squeal, before going down on her.

Then, he got his job at Hargreaves. Her career took off, too. With the extra income, they got the condo in Vaughan. And now, he finds out she's been cheating on him for the past three months, sleeping with some other guy, he's a cuckold, a loser, and why? Because he'd been working too hard, doing what he thought was right for the two of them and their future life together. And look how that turned out.

All this floods through him in an instant. He grips his knees and stares into the bottom of his cup of coffee. He wants to talk about it and let it all out. But guys don't talk about this kind of thing, do they? Especially with complete strangers. And now his head throbs and he winces and doesn't want to talk anymore.

Besides, Galen doesn't want to hear his sob story, not really. He's clearly a nice guy, and just being polite, filling the space between now, and bedtime, and when he can finally get rid of the loser who nearly crashed into his house. And finally forcing his gaze up, Daniel thinks, for fuck's sake, man up! Just look at this guy, why can't you be more like him? He slips his fingers down the back of his jeans, feels the lacy trim of his underwear. It's hard to feel manly in his pretty pair of panties. And his head hurts, he hugs himself and bites his lip and realizes to his even deeper mortification that he's on the cusp of tears. He's tired and he's hurting and the kindness of this stranger is too much.

"Yeah," Galen says, and the deep timbre of his voice resonates with sympathy. "I know that feeling." The man stands, walks over to a solid wood cabinet. This is in the living space of the open floor, separated from the dining area by a wood pillar and the back of the sofa. There's a TV screen mounted on the wall, and a bookshelf, a low table and the two-seater sofa sit opposite a single, comfy looking chair below a suspended lamp. It's a cozy arrangement, with the seats oriented towards windows rather than the television. Galen retrieves a bottle of brown liquor from the cabinet, and two tumblers, and carries them over to a small end table by the sofa. "Maybe you need something stronger than coffee." He holds the bottle aloft. "Scotch?"

Daniel nods. Galen pours, gestures him over, indicating the sofa, and passes him a glass. The larger man drops into the single chair. He holds the tumbler to his nose and inhales deeply, brow furrowed with concentration, and sighs with pleasure. Feeling as though he should do the same, Daniel gives the drink a sniff. His nose wrinkles at the smell. Truth is, he doesn't like whiskey, he's never developed a taste for it. He prefers a quality glass of wine, once upon a time a nice red, maybe a Shiraz or Rioja, though over the past year Chloe's mostly insisted on white, and now he's developed a taste for that. So, given the choice, he'd prefer a nice, chilled Chardonnay right now, but he doesn't feel he can refuse his host's offer. Besides—there's something undeniably *masculine* in sipping a fine whiskey, and Daniel needs that feeling right now, considering what he wears beneath his jeans.

"Glengoyne 18." Galen indicates the bottle. "I went a few years ago. To Scotland. Visiting a friend. He took me around to visit a few distilleries. I'm not much of a drinker. Didn't appreciate scotch until then. Never drank the stuff. But this friend of mine, Roy, he taught me."

He takes a sip. “It’s a little bit crazy, when you think about it. Nearly twenty years to make this stuff. Wouldn’t you agree? Just think about it, eighteen years sitting in barrels in a darkened room, leeching flavour from the oak, and colour, starting as this one thing, pretty much raw barley booze and over time, maturing into—this.” He takes another sip. “And think of that, all those years—how life just carried on around this thing slowly becoming what it was always meant to be.” A hint of a smile hides behind the tumbler. “Can you ever remember who you were, twenty years ago?”

Daniel sniffs at the drink. It smells like strong alcohol to him and little else. With his head hurting as it does, he feels on the cusp of a foul mood, anxiety and sadness swirling darkly beneath the surface, and Galen’s words tap into that. He imagines then, and with surprising vividness, being locked away in some cellar in the dark, the slow, forced transformation, the insidious seeping of the outer shell into the inner self, oak sherry barrels leaking flavour and colour into what had before been simple and pure alcohol. The whiskey burns very slightly as he breathes it in: probably, this drink is better for its time in a barrel, but the time and cost to create this final product, was it really worth it?

These thoughts make him uncomfortable, though he doesn’t know why. He suppresses a shudder, hides his discomfort behind a sip. He’s not convinced any booze is a good idea, considering how he feels. At the same time, he needs to prove himself. He holds the scotch on the tongue for a moment. It burns, and his eyes water, and then he swallows, and the drink is smoother than expected, tasting slightly of vanilla.

“Good?” Galen asks.

Daniel forces a smile, nods.

“So, twenty years ago, you were, what, five, six?”

“Seven.”

“I was twelve,” Galen says. “And just think about it. Between then and now, while this was sitting in the dark, the world, so much happening. Like, 9-11 happened, right around the time the barrels were put to rest. I was nine, then. And my God, how the world changed after that, right? Iraq. And Afghanistan. It’s crazy. America went nuts and there was the Patriot Act, and for a while, down south, they wouldn’t eat our bacon, remember that? Renamed it freedom bacon.” He shakes his head in mock disbelief. “Bush was president and we thought he was an idiot and had no idea how much worse it could get.” A bigger drink then, exhaling with a hiss, and then a smile. “My first phone was a Blackberry, remember those?”

Daniel laughs. “Yeah. Yeah, I remember those.”

At first hesitant, Daniel eases into the conversation. The whiskey helps. The first sip burned, but less so with each drink, and with some urging from his host, deeper flavours emerge, a little sweetness on the nose, a little nutty on the tongue, spice lingering after each drink. They talk about how the world’s changed over the past twenty years. Covid! they both say. Then, they take turns. Galen mentions, with a smile, the 2010 Winter Olympics in Vancouver, that gold-medal game, the national pride. He talks about the war on terror, the death of bin Laden, the capture of Saddam Hussein. Closer to home, he talks Harper—nearly spitting out the name—and then about Trudeau, his legacy, and finally Trump. In contrast, Daniel talks about the financial crisis in 2008, the rise in property costs in Toronto, the impossibility of finding an

affordable place to live. Me Too and Black Lives Matters, the rise of streaming services and the death of physical media.

Not quite dead, Galen says with a smile, and rising from his chair he crosses over to the TV and beneath it, Daniel notices for the first time a record player, a sleek, modern device. It sits atop a squat square cabinet and Galen, after a moment's thought, extracts an LP. He twirls it between thumb and forefinger, slips out the record and places it on the player. At the press of a button, the needle rises, smoothly slides over and descends. There's a faint hiss and crackle, and then music, which Daniel immediately recognizes, X&Y by Coldplay.

"There we go," Galen says, "the sound of twenty years ago." Standing, he pours out a splash more whiskey for the two of them, then raises the bottle to the light. The bottle is empty. Daniel feels a pang of guilt. He doesn't drink the stuff, but knows it's expensive, probably a hundred bucks, maybe even two, for a bottle like this. He tries to apologize, and Galen waves it off with a smile, settling back into his chair.

"Why? The stuff's meant for drinking" he says. "I've had this bottle three years. I can't think of a better way to polish it off." He raises the glass in cheer. "Now, what else changed the world?"

Daniel takes a moment to think. Truth is, he feels more than a little drunk, already. His head still hurts, but the pain is diffuse and distant behind a pleasant haze of alcohol. He sits on the leather sofa, legs curled up beneath him. He barely even notices the panties anymore. When he does, it raises a little spot of red to his cheeks, but this is lost beneath the ruddy glow of drunkenness. Rather than embarrassment, he feels a sort of naughty pleasure, in the secret knowledge of what he wears beneath his jeans. From time to time, he slips his hand down the back of his jeans, gently touching the tip of his fingertips to the lace waist of his underwear. He scratches the base of his spine. In a way, this keeps him grounded, and each time the pain in his forehead eases.

"Smartphones," Daniel says. Then, he starts. "Shit! Where's my phone?" Normally, he's attached at the hip to his phone. But with everything that's happened today, he completely forgot about it.

"It's probably still out there," Galen says, jerking a thumb in the direction of outside. "Sorry. I didn't think of it." Daniel shakes his head, brushing off the apology, and goes to rise with some vague idea of dashing outside to rescue his phone. What felt like pleasant drunkenness doubles down on heavy intoxication, and the room wobbles. Red-faced, Daniel falls back into the sofa.

Laughing, Galen waves him back. "Hey buddy, relax, I'll get it. Snow out there's real heavy anyway, I'll have to shovel a path to your car. Besides, I could use a breath of fresh air, that booze went straight to my head."

Galen pulls on some tall boots, a long coat, scarf and toque and heads outside. A gust of cold air swirls into the house, and Daniel shivers. Then, he's alone, in this stranger's house, drunk. Though it feels wrong to think of him as a stranger, after their long talk. For a short time, Daniel simply sits there, content in the warmth of Galen's home. He takes another sip of his drink and sees it's all gone. The home is cozy and comfortable. He finds himself grinning, unexpectedly happy in his drunkenness. Galen didn't need to head out, in the cold night, to get

his phone. That was a really nice thing to do. He's lucky, really: if he was going to crash the car, he couldn't have picked a better place to do it.

Somehow, that doesn't seem right, but he lets the thought slip away and stands. He reaches down the front of his jeans and adjusts himself, feels the lace, feels the embroidered front, pictures how his cock is curled up tight beneath mesh and cute butterflies; and that doesn't seem quite right, either, but he lets that go, too. Instead, he stands up, slower this time. The room rights itself, and he begins to idly walk around the room, inspecting more closely all the little details he never had time to notice before. There are photographs dotted here and there around the room. The first shows Galen arm-in-arm with a group of men and women, and they're all wearing uniform. Military uniform, Daniel realizes, and moving on he finds another picture, this time of just Galen, standing straight and proud, in dress uniform, with regimental colours, though Daniel doesn't recognize them. In a third picture, Galen stands in military uniform, rifle in hand, wearing dark glasses. The terrain behind him is yellow and beige, the sky an impossible blue contrasting with sand, dust and jagged rock. Finally, on the wood beam dividing kitchen from living room, he finds a small, framed photo of a young woman in a simple white dress, hand clasped together in front of her, holding a red purse. A wide-brimmed hat with a red ribbon shades her face, and she looks off to one side. There's a hint of a smile, and behind her the frontage of what appears to be a train station. She's very pretty, Daniel thinks.

He finds the bookshelf mostly filled with military books, and history books, some of it European history, a lot of it local. A few paperback novels with dog-eared corners. And, on the bottom shelf, photo albums. He takes one from the middle and opens it to a random page. It's not the kind of thing he'd normally do, but he's drunk. Also, Galen told him to make himself at home. He's such an affable host, it doesn't feel wrong to take somebody's personal photo album off the shelf and take a look. Besides, he feels a strange, intense curiosity to know more about this man, though he couldn't say why.

The first picture he sees is that of the same young woman. Again, Daniel is struck by how pretty she is, and innocent looking. In this picture, she wears a simple brown dress with white polka dots, tied at the waist with a ribbon, with white pantyhose. Her hair falls in gentle waves to just past her chin, held back by a simple hairband, and her eyes are hazel. Like his, Daniel thinks, and he touches his hair, unkempt after all these months, and realize there's a similarity there, too. In fact, this girl, she seems to be roughly the same height and size as him, too. He flicks backwards and forwards, scanning across a series of pictures of this cute woman, some set in winter, others in the summer. She's young, in the earliest photos, maybe only eighteen or nineteen, and he sees her in a bikini, in an evening dress, in jeans and a t-shirt. In one photo, she's standing bleary-eyed clutching a toothbrush in one hand and a curly-haired teddy bear in the other, wearing the same pink-with-black-cats nightie as he wore last night, bunched up around her waist. Small breasts push out the front of long shirt, and she wears lilac panties, and these are also the same as the ones he currently wears. Heat prickles the back of his neck, and he quickly turns the page.

Later in the book, he finds wedding photos: the girl, standing in white, her long dress glittering with little crystals, like some fairy princess, both demure and sexy; and next to her, Galen, younger and looking very handsome in military dress uniform, short haired, beardless, and smiling broadly.

"What you looking at there, buddy?"

Daniel starts guiltily. Somehow, he hadn't heard Galen's return. He stands woozily, clutching the album, and tries to apologize. Brushing snow from his shoulders, Galen shrugs off the apology. He rejoins Daniel, sees the album and frowns. He takes the album and gazes at the wedding photos for some time, in silence. There's sadness in his face, but also joy. Almost as quickly as the frown came, it goes, and instead his face split in a slow, wide smile. "It's been too long since I looked at these. God, look at us." He angles the album so Daniel can see it. "Those were good days."

"What's her name?"

"Amber," Galen answered, resting his fingertips over a photo of her, laughing, arm-in-arm with two other young women, bridesmaids from the look of it, all three kicking up their left leg, like a dancing line in a cabaret show. "My wife." Then, he sighed, and his smile flagged. "Or rather, she was. She's gone now. It's been three years now."

Daniel's face reddened, and he felt bad, for looking at these photos uninvited, and dredging up bad memories. His guilt cuts through his drunken contentment. Instead, he feels the return of his earlier anxiety, the dark, churning feelings threatening to drag him down. With it, the pain in his forehead redoubles, no longer defuse but now direct and stabbing. He winces, squeezes his hands into tight fists at his side. "I'm sorry."

"What for?" Galen continued to gaze down at the album, and though clearly saddened by memory, a determined, fierce joy flared in his eyes. "Best goddamn years of my life, the ones I spent with her. Wouldn't trade a single second away. She was the best thing that ever happened to me." He hesitates, opens his mouth to speak, gives his head a shake and stays silent, eyes flicking in Daniel's direction. A curious sort of bashfulness seems to seize the man, and the way he looks at him, it makes Daniel feel warm. A sudden, ridiculous instinct to hug this man he barely knows seizes him, to offer comfort for the memory of a lost wife, and he backs away, because offering that kind of emotional support isn't manly, it's presumptuous even, and insulting, to think this guy even *needs* his help, the help of a stranger.

Instead, he sits on the sofa, and gnaws on his lower lip, feeling once again acutely aware of the underwear he wears, and guilt eats at him, for raising sad memories. Eventually, Galen rouses himself. He scratches at the back of his head, then reaches into his pocket.

"Here you go," he says, and tosses a phone over.

Wordlessly, Daniel catches the phone. He tries turning it on, but it's dead. He has a charger in his suitcase, thinks about retreating to the bedroom. Besides, it's probably time to call it a night. Despite the submersion in whiskey, he feels his temple hurting more acutely, and tiredness tugs at his eyelids. His drunkenness catches up to him, and it occurs to him that polishing off a bottle of scotch on a mostly empty stomach while still suffering from a mild concussion, probably wasn't the smartest thing.

"I'm afraid there's not much signal out this way. The house is in a bit of a dip, you see. Gives a bit of shelter from the wind, but makes it hard to get a decent signal," Galen explains. "Wifi code's over by the TV there. But that's been spotty since the storm started. If you can wait until morning, a little walk up the hill usually nabs a bit of signal, just enough for messages to get in or out."

Daniel slips the phone into his pocket, rubs his face with his hand, yawns, only half performatively. His host laughs. "Yeah, it's getting late. I'm going to clean up down here, head to

bed. My room's the one next to yours. You've probably guessed you're in Amber's old room. I hope you don't mind. We used to have a guest room, but I turned it into an office about a year ago." Daniel nods, winces. Galen gives him a sympathetic pat on the shoulder. "Yeah, you better take care of that. There's Advil in the bathroom if you need it."

Nodding absently, Daniel shuffles upstairs, stifling another yawn, feeling the pain in his temple grow with each step. Exhaustion nips at his heels, and his limbs feel heavy. He pauses at the top of the stairs. He looks down and sees the room from above. Galen still stands next to the bookshelf and holds the photo album in his large hands. The book is closed, and he stares blankly at it, slowly sweeps his fingers across its surface, like an archaeologist gently brushing dust away from bones in the earth.

"Hey, Galen," Daniel calls out, softly. "I just wanted to say—thank you. For everything. I had a good night."

The man glances up, smiles. "Yeah, me too, buddy."

Back in the room, Daniel doesn't waste any time. He strips off his clothes. With each piece of masculine clothing he sheds, the pain eases. This offends him. What's so masculine about a pair of jeans or a goddamn hoodie? he wonders, yet knows it's true, it's the essential non-femininity of each item that intensified the pain felt all night. Now standing naked but for the pair of panties, swaying slightly in a drunken haze, he feels lighter and almost free of pain.

The panties really are beautiful, and in the dark room with the curtains open, ivory moonlight washes over him and the little diamantes sparkle and the butterflies gleam as though alive. The panties are very snug on him, and meant for a flat front, obviously. They're designed to sit high on hips he doesn't have. And yet, they're cute, more than that, beautiful, lilac in moonlight. He knows he should feel ashamed but drunk as he is, he pushes beyond that and for a moment, admires his appearance. He's slim, from working out in the gym three times a week, or at least he used to until everything started to go wrong. But still. In a way, the panties accentuate his flat belly, his slender hips. Plenty of guys his age whose bellies are already pushing out, waist sizes growing every year, but he's holding steady at a trim 30 inches. He thinks of some of his colleagues—possibly former colleagues—both male and female and doesn't think they'd look half as good as he does, wearing these panties.

He turns a little in the mirror, notes how the thong slips between his ass cheeks but also emphasizes them. He's got a good ass, even Chloe used to say so, giving him a playful smack across the bottom. God, he misses her. Biting his lower lip, he reaches into the panties and adjusts himself, tucks his penis down and flat, and pulls the panties up a little tighter. He poses in the pale light, hands on hips, and sees himself across a pleasant drunken distance.

The floor creaks, outside his door. A heavy step: Galen, walking past. Christ, what the fuck am I doing, Daniel thinks, and blushing for shame, he flees to the toilet, the one behind the decorated wall and cleverly concealed door. He locks the door and sits in the dark to piss. A little moonlight beams through a window. He clutches his head in his hand. His head throbs. Something anxious and dark churns inside of him, drunken self-loathing and fear and frustration, barely kept in check by a determined effort to put all this behind him and just get to bed.

Finishing, he stands and tugs the panties back into place, surreptitiously pushing his penis down as he does so. He washes his hands and then opens the top drawers of a large

cabinet by the sink. As promised, he finds a bottle of Advil in there, among many other things. It's stocked full, mostly with medicines he doesn't recognize, and in the next drawer, a carefully arranged array of female products, shaving cream, razor, tubs and vials vaguely familiar from sharing a bathroom with Chloe. But he doesn't care about those now and grabs the Advil, shakes out a pair of yellow pills into his hand, then a third, finally a fourth, gulps them down with a glassful of water from the tap and returns to the bedroom.

It's not enough; he knows a few pills won't ease the pain. He feels it growing behind his temple, like a seed unfurling, pushing out roots, thrusting upwards, expanding towards the light. The panties on their own aren't enough, either. A whimper escapes his lips. He doesn't want to do this. But he remembers the agony of before, feels its return. His stomach clenches tight. His ears grow hot, as does the back of his neck, and despite the relative cool of the room, his naked torso breaks out in sweat.

Daniel staggers over to the dresser, yanks open the bottom drawer and wincing, eyes half-squeezed shut for the pain, fumbles through the clothes he finds. He feels something soft and light, gauzy with a fuzzy trim. Just the coolness of the fabric is enough to bring some relief. He clutches it between his hands, and trembles. Briefly, he resists the urge. It's wrong, he tells himself, it's stupid. Also, it's unfair, I don't want this, I don't want to do this, be the kind of person who wears this kind of thing. But his resistance is short lived, as the pain escalates, and with a final gasp, he surrenders to the urge, and threads his arms through the delicate loops, raises it overhead and lets the babydoll float down, over his shoulders, and settle softly across his body.

With all the suddenness of a lightning strike, the pain is gone, almost as if it had never been, and in its wake, a swell of pleasure, almost erotic in its intensity. He doesn't look at himself in the mirror. He doesn't look down at himself. Instead, with his arms at his side, fists clenched tight with anger, and nearly sobbing with frustration, Daniel throws himself into bed, burrowing under the comforter, and burying his face in pillows.

Almost instantly, he falls into a deep, dreamless sleep, haunted by the distant feeling of floating like a single cloud in a bright sky, exposed, vulnerable, and beautiful.

Chapter Three

Daniel wakes to a soft white glow seeping into the room. Sunlight, pale and flat, suffuses the room through curtains left open last night. His mouth is dry, his tongue thick. Despite this, he feels wonderfully refreshed and much to his surprise, free of a hangover. He slept deeply, his rest unbroken. He can't remember the last time he slept so well. The past few weeks have been plagued by bad sleep and worse dreams, anxious tossing and turning throughout the night. But not last night. Smiling, he rolls away from the window and stretches luxuriantly, and instantly feels foreign fabric bunched between his thighs. Straps dig into his shoulders, and silk and lace tugs tightly across his chest. He bolts upright in the bed, shoving the sheets back.

Staring down at himself, he sees the lilac panties, he remembers wearing them to bed last night. But he sees them through the gossamer veiling of an eggshell blue babydoll negligee. Delicate straps rest over his shoulders, and his nipples are visible through a lacy bodice. The negligee floats to mid-thigh, lightly tickling his bare skin. Groaning, he falls back into his pillow, arm thrown across his face. What the fuck, he thinks. When did I put this thing on?

For some time, he lies in bed, eyes squeezed shut. He can feel the bruise over his temple, and the bandage covering it. It doesn't hurt right now, at least not sharply, but there's a constant heat radiating from it. He imagines a network of fine lines, dark coils of discomfort threading into his flesh, through his skull, and penetrating the brain, like a puppet's strings, tugging. Then, with his eyes still closed, he senses the women's clothing, the lilac panties, the diaphanous negligee. He's never worn clothing like this in his life, never had any interest in such things beyond a perfect ordinary curiosity, which is to say, an admiration for the women he's known who've worn lingerie, an appreciation for the effort, and a wonder at the possible discomfort they accept as a price worth paying to look or feel good. After all, Chloe made such a big deal out of it: uncomfortable, objectifying, patriarchal, male power fantasy, she said. If you think they're so sexy, why the fuck don't *you* wear it, and this only a few short months ago.

And he gets it, he does, he thinks, though not so much the uncomfortable part. Like, yes, he feels uncomfortable, in the sense that what he's wearing is *wrong*, and if he thinks too long on it, his stomach feels like it did when the car spun out on the road, the dizzying twist, the loss of control. It reminds him of when he snapped at work, the shouting and swearing, the smash of glass and bloodied knuckles—or rather the immediate aftermath, as the anger lifted, and his spirits dropped, and the blood drained from his face.

But otherwise, it's not so bad, these clothes, just different. Objectifying, yes, maybe, in the way the panties accentuate his ass, and the babydoll certainly emphasizes a certain vulnerability, it's in the name, really. There's something about power embedded in the very nature of these clothes, though in the dozy haze of the morning, he doesn't feel inclined to think it through too deeply.

Mostly, it strikes him that what he's wearing, right now, it's really not that uncomfortable, or at least, not physically so. He could do without the thong, though truth be told he barely noticed it after wearing it a few hours last night, though the distraction of his bare bum against the inside texture of his jeans never quite left him. After all, these fabrics are all totally different from anything he's worn. The panties are cool and tight against his skin, the babydoll dry and a little grainy, where it drifts across his bare torso and thighs. The band across his chest, just below his pecs, feels a little restrictive, except for where the fabric billows out for breasts he doesn't possess.

He groans. Why the fuck is he even thinking about this? He needs to get these clothes off, now, and get back into more sensible things, like his boxer briefs. First, he steels himself. Then, he swings his legs out of the bed and finds the floor, toes curling into the thick pink rug. He stands, and the babydoll settles around his torso and thighs with a gentle sigh. Scratching at his bum, he adjusts the panties, pats the babydoll down, twists it into place. He considers taking it off then and there, then decides against it. A few more minutes won't hurt, and it's not particularly uncomfortable or anything, just wrong, the way it trembles with every movement, the constant subtle reminder of its presence.

Instead, he moves to the window. The rug beneath his feet is pleasantly warm, and the glass of the window chill beneath his fingertips. Outside, all is heavy, still whiteness. A heavy fog lies across the house, and the trees out front stand as ghostly guardians at the edge of the property. His car, already buried beneath snow, is completely hidden, and wisps of wet air hover directly outside the window. This ethereal mistiness sends a little shiver down Daniel's spine and he feels adrift, for a moment, like a sailor lost in a sea of vapours.

This uneasiness lingers as he pads into the bathroom. On the way, he passes the full-length mirror by the dresser. He studiously avoids his reflection, ignores the glimpse of pale blue, the delicate flutter of a trailing hem.

A little winter morning light filters through the etched glass of a heavy oculus window and brighten the spacious bathroom. Last night, in the dark, he hadn't taken the time to appreciate its design. The walls are divided by a thick mahogany dado rail, lower wainscoting painted a deep marine blue, the field above a luminous, rich cream. A collection of gilt-framed art hangs from the dado rail. There is a print of Millais' golden-haired child blowing bubbles, flanked by several sketches of ethereal, winged fairies. Near the door, hidden when open but displayed when closed, is a study of a bathing wood-nymph stepping gingerly from a stream. Her large breasts hang free, topped with pink nipples, her naked sex lightly furred, and her skin glistens with water as she passes her hands through her long, blonde hair.

In one corner, sitting on a raised tiled dais, is a massive cast-iron tub with gleaming gilt claws. Linen shower curtains hang open from suspended rails. Opposite this stands a wide porcelain pedestal basin with separate hot and cold cross-head taps, and above the basin an oval mirror, slightly tarnished with age. A heavy, dark wooden cabinet sits next to it, and near the tub sits the toilet, with a polished mahogany seat and heavy ceramic cistern mounted near the ceiling, operated by a porcelain-handled pull chain.

Daniel smiles as he inspects the room. Last night, he hadn't appreciated the attention to detail. The Victorian detailing stands in marked contrast to the rest of the house. He imagines it was done to a woman's specification, and standing there, Daniel wonders what it reflects of the character of the woman who once used it. What she was like, this—Amber? and the name returns to him, the photo album, the pain clear in his host's gentle brown eyes.

Best years of my life, Galen said last night. Wouldn't trade a single second away. The best thing that ever happened to me. And Daniel wonders, will I ever feel that strongly about someone else? And then his breath catches in his throat, for just a moment, and he wonders: will anyone ever feel that way about me?

Chloe springs to mind. He shakes his head and dispels these thoughts. No, not now; but even with that fleeting thought, and with the pain of their breakup still raw, he knows: he never felt that strongly about her. And neither did she, for him.

Grimacing, he takes a piss. A proper one this time, standing up and everything, panties down around his knees, trailing hem of the negligee pinned between chin and chest. Then Daniel sniffs himself and realizes he needs a shower, it's been days. This makes him pause. He can't wear these clothes into the shower. What if Galen checked in on him? He seems like the kind of host to check the bathroom and make sure there's enough toilet paper, and the towels are fresh. How would he explain sopping wet panties drying on a towel rack?

But maybe, he hopes, the pain's eased overnight. As his injury heals, so too must this absurd compulsion? Gnawing on his lower lip, he stands there, unsure, unwilling to experience the previous pain but also determined to get in the shower. He could just grab a washcloth and use some soap and wipe down his armpits and crotch, splash some water in his face. He *could* do that, but he really wants a shower. And besides, that's just avoiding the problem.

For a minute, he just stands there. He feels air blow from the vents, warms the room, setting the hem of the babydoll to flutter against his thighs, and despite the heat the lingerie feels cool against his skin. Daniel shivers, rubs the trailing hem of the negligee between forefinger and thumb. Paralysed by indecision, he looks around the room for something to nudge him forward. He finds it in his reflection in the mirror. In seeing himself, he is deeply ashamed of himself, feels it in his gut, a tight ball forming there, hard and sharp. The negligee makes a mockery of his flat chest, the white, fuzzy trim and floating fabric, those lovely panties, a parody of his masculinity. Gritting his teeth, he grips the hem of the babydoll and in one swift movement, lifts it over his head.

Instantly, searing hurt stabs right through his eye. He gags from the pain, braces himself against the sink. He holds that position for a long minute, panting, and gradually feels the pain ebb. He's still wearing the panties, after all. Another minute, and he opens his eyes, winces at light that suddenly seems too bright. I've got this, he thinks, hooks the panties with his thumbs, and tugs them down to his ankles.

The jolt of agony down his spine is so intense he crumples to the floor, gasping. It's unendurable, this pain, ridiculous and stupid and unfair, but also undeniable and irresistible, and squeezing his eyes shut, on the verge of tears, he yanks the panties back into place. Panting, he stays curled up on the floor, back to the wall, forehead to his knees. Shit, he thinks. Fuck, what am I going to do?

And suddenly, he knows what to do, and with startling clarity. He recalls something he saw in the cabinet last night, dimly glimpsed and ignored, resting on its side next to the Advil, a metallic gleam in the dark. Sweating, clutching his head, he all but crawls to the cabinet, pulls himself to his feet and yanks the top drawer open. He knocks bottles and boxes over with a clatter, a rattle of pills and plastic. Then, he grabs the short, stubby metallic bullet. Now, he stands in front of the mirror. Its surface is slightly tarnished, bronze and dull green spots at the edges. He avoids eye contact with himself. He can't believe he's about to do this. But his head hurts so much, and he knows this will alleviate the pain.

The lipstick is pink, with a slight shimmer. Daniel remembers watching Chloe put on her makeup in the morning. She did it, of course, with the unconscious confidence of years of practice, the swipe of lipstick, the flick of a mascara wand. There were nights, vanishingly few over the past year, in which she was more meticulous with her makeup, dramatic and bold, and the performance of its application strangely arresting, almost erotic to observe. Lipstick in a rich

red shade, painted from a little pot to primed lip with an elegant brush; the dotting of lotions across her face; the sweep of a wide brush; the careful line drawn along eyelids.

But Daniel's hands tremble, and his stomach churns, and he applies the lipstick to his mouth in short, furtive swipes, too thickly, but with each stroke the pain eases. He rubs his lips together and feels the tackiness there, an unfamiliar heaviness. Puts the lipstick down on the edge of the sink. Takes a deep breath. Has no intention of looking at himself in the mirror but finds his gaze arrested by a pink gleam in the glass. His lips: and despite its inexpert application, he's surprised at how feminine his lips look, fuller and softer, with a faint sheen that catches the winter light.

Fuck this, Daniel thinks, goes to wipe the lipstick away with the back of his hand only to realize that the pain is gone. His forehead feels cool to the touch. Now, when he tentatively slips the panties down his legs, and kicks free of them, he feels a twinge but nothing worse than that. He's able to step into the shower, twist the taps over and make the water as hot as he can bear. Over the length of his shower, the pain gradually begins to return, but he has ample time to wash himself thoroughly, taking care to keep the water from his pink-painted mouth.

Feeling refreshed, and in better spirits for it, he returns to the bedroom. Okay, he thinks. So I've got wear panties. It's hardly the end of the world. It's got to ease off, this pain; I'm sure the urge will go away, too. It just needs some time, time for this bump on my head to heal. In the meantime, well—lucky, he thinks, that he ended up in a room so well stocked with feminine apparel he can secretly wear during his convalescence.

He slips yesterday's panties back on, returns to the bathroom and takes a washcloth to his face. He scrubs his face vigorously, using soap, the taste bitter around his mouth, and rubs with intense pressure across his lips. Even when he's done, and the lipstick is gone, he imagines he can still feel it there, as a faint pressure and wonders whether the colour of his lips is natural, or slightly darker than normal, maybe pinker with lingering traces of makeup.

But no, it's gone; completely, to judge by the return of pain, the dull, diffuse hurt emanating once again from his temple. Daniel sits at the edge of the bed, staring absently out the window. The fog remains, the air is still, and the world outside seems dim and distant. He wants the pain gone. He wants this desperately. The thought of stumbling through the entire day with his head throbbing, his body aching, it's too much, better to just crawl back under the sheets and hide. But he can't do that. It's not his house. And besides, he's hungry—nearly starving, he realizes, yesterday's slice of bread and bowl of soup wasn't enough, not by far. Though fortuitous, maybe, because at its most intense, the pain precludes the possibility of food and makes him want to vomit.

What can he do? It seems the panties on their own are no longer enough. It's not like he can wear lipstick all day, or anywhere outside of this room. What got him through his shower won't do for the rest of the day. He needs something he can wear but keep hidden.

Galen's coming in from outside as Daniel finally emerges from the bedroom and walks downstairs. The man's beard glitters with flecks of ice, and his hair is damp with snow. His cheeks are flushed red, and his eyes are bright. He takes off his heavy coat, scarf and toque, hangs them on a hook by the door.

"Hey there, buddy." Galen kicks his boots against the doorframe, kneels to unlace them. "Sleep well?"

"Like a baby," Daniel answers.

"Your head?"

"Not too bad, actually," Daniel says, walking past the man, over to the sofa. He fears his walk is a little funny. This wouldn't be surprising, considering what he's wearing. But he can't bring himself to care. "Good, actually. I think I'm on the mend."

Galen grunts, places his boots on a rack. "No pain?"

Daniel grins. "No pain." Which is true. After a day of constant pain, its absence leaves him nearly giddy with joy. That it requires him to wear a pretty pair of panties and, over them, pantyhose, seems a price well worth paying. The pantyhose are sheer, with only a hint of black, very thin and unexpectedly comfortable, a cooling sibilant whisper against the skin. Except for the waistband, which sits much higher than anything he normally wears, cutting across just above his bellybutton. He's aware of the gentle rasp of the pantyhose beneath his jeans—inaudible, of course, but it *feels* like Galen can hear the secret sound of his shame, and Daniel feels aware of every step, and weirdly more present in the moment because of it.

"Good." Galen moves into the kitchen, scratching his beard. "Been outside this morning digging out the car. Going to grab the four-wheeler later, see if I can get it out the ditch. The snow's eased off, but that fog is something else. Weather report's not clear, but in my opinion, we're on the other side of the storm, now. So long as this fog clears, the township'll get the plough out, probably have one down this road by this evening."

Daniel nods. Because he's listening more to the timbre of the man's voice, to the slow, gravelly rhythm of his speaking, it takes a moment for the implication of Galen's words to sink in. His host is working hard to get him gone. Of course he is, he tells himself; he's a stranger, after all. The man was looking forward to Christmas alone. And yet Daniel feels unexpectedly hurt by the man's hurry to be rid of him.

"I called the Lodge this morning." Galen begins to make coffee, measuring out spoonfuls of grind with the same methodical slowness as yesterday. "I'll tell you, John was so relieved to hear you were okay, they said they tried calling, emailing, they were really worried something happened to you. I told them you were fine, that the storm forced you to pull over and that I put you up for the night." Coffee on stove, twist of dial, blue flame. Galen speaks over his shoulder, reaching for a cup from the cupboard. "I think they're planning to refund you the lost day. Or at least make it up to you somehow. Like I said, they're good people."

"Anyway, guess that means you'll be free to go on your way, Daniel."

He hesitates, looks as though he's about to add something but then shakes his head. He reaches for sugar, grabs milk from the fridge. The bag is empty, and he removes it, disposing of the plastic in the garbage bin. He retrieves a new bag of milk from the fridge, drops it in the plastic holder, lifts it, lets it drop with a bang against the counter so that the bag settles to the bottom. With a flick of a knife, he slices the corner of the bag. Daniel watches all of this and gnaws on his lower lip. The pain remains at bay, but the earlier euphoria is gone.

"Oh—" He swallows, his mouth dry. "Okay."

Galen nods. He still hasn't turned around. He stands at the stove, waiting for the percolator to boil. Both cups wait on the counter, one empty, the other one ready with a splash of milk, two spoonfuls of sugar. The gas stovetop hisses. Daniel moves to the kitchen table and sits. He crosses his legs at the knee and is again reminded of his borrowed pantyhose. He blushes. Galen turns, then. There's something hard in his eyes, as though he's steeled himself to some decision. Then he sees his guest. His gaze softens almost immediately. He leans back against the counter, arms crossed across his chest. He scratches at his beard, and grins ruefully.

"But—there's no rush."

Daniel lets out a breath. He hadn't even realised he'd held it in. Tension across his shoulder eases. "Are you sure? I don't want—"

Galen waves him off. The coffee's ready, and he pours it out, brings it over. Daniel takes a sip. It's very hot, but less bitter than yesterday. He smiles gratefully. Then, his stomach grumbles. His host starts, scratches at the back of his head, and looks a little abashed. "Oh man, sorry, buddy, you must be starving. Like I said, I'm not much of a cook. I can do you some toast?"

Daniel nods. A moment later, an impulse seizes him and he stands up and says, "Hey, why don't you sit down, let me do breakfast?" He's nervous, his voice comes out pitched higher than expected. He feels the heat in his cheeks spread down his neck, across his face. "I mean—toast is fine—it's just—" He taps the surface of the kitchen table with his index finger, once, twice. "I dunno, like, it's the least I can do, right? You've been out all morning? Working, and I've just been—lying around."

"With a concussion."

"Sure, but." Daniel shrugs. "It'll do me good to move a bit and actually do something."

Galen considers this. Behind him, the percolator begins its little song. "I feel like a bad host," he says, pouring out the coffee.

"Believe me, you're not." Daniel almost laughs. The pain remains at bay and he's almost giddy for it. "You just go and—do whatever it is you need to do. I'll whip something up."

Looking somewhat bemused, but pleased, Galen nods. He indicates where things are—dry goods in the pantry, aprons on a hook behind the door; fridge, cupboards, seasonings—and takes so long doing it Daniel loses patience, shushes the man away. "I've got this," he says.

From the pantry, he takes an apron, ties it around his neck and waist. There are three hanging there, and he takes the one from the back. The first one looks way too big; the second plain white, dotted with faded pink splotches, a butcher's apron. The third is light brown with a ruffled white trim. Effeminate, perhaps, but he's already wearing panties and hose, he's a bit beyond caring at this point. He pulls it on over his head, ties it off and it's a good fit, somehow comforting, and he feels suffused with subdued pleasure, with the thought of making breakfast, as if the sun's diffuse morning glow that had filled his bedroom this morning had somehow found its way into this pantry, and filled him, too.

The pantry is very well stocked, the fridge somewhat less so. Daniel pauses for a moment, tapping a finger to his chin. Omelettes? He checks for eggs, there's only two left. Not much fruit, either, just a small punnet of blueberries. Maybe pancakes? He checks for flour: yes,

and sugar, no problem. Baking powder? There's none in the pantry. He pops his head out, calls out for Galen, but the man's not around: he passes by the window at the front, bundled in coat and scarf, a dim figure wreathed in fog.

Set on the idea of pancakes, Daniel digs through the kitchen cupboards. The last one he checks is a tall, narrow unit by the fridge, deep, filled with tightly-sealed jars, jams, jellies and pickles, each meticulously labelled and dated. Apricots jam, chilli jelly, spiced pickle, zucchini, most of it from the past year. Sifting through the jars, he finds baking goods, most of it past their best before date: yeast, baking soda, some dried fruit and behind that, a small stack of baking pans. Then he spots it—gotcha! Daniel thinks—baking powder. Grabbing it, he notices, buried at the very back of the cupboard, behind the trays, what appears to be a stack of letters.

He takes the powder, hesitates, retrieves the letters, too. There's a bundle of them, about half a dozen maybe, in envelopes, tied together with a brown piece of string. Only one of the envelopes has been opened, the others remain sealed. Across the front of each, written in a cursive, feminine handwriting, is the name Galen Laroque, and the cabin's rural road address. There is no return address on the top envelope.

Daniel glances towards the door. There's no sign of Galen. His heart beats loudly in his chest and he feels suddenly warm. He unties the string and tugs the letter out of its open envelope. There is a faint whiff of floral perfume, slightly stale with age. The letter appears to be three handwritten pages in length, folded over, all of it written in the same small, cursive, feminine hand as the front of the envelope. The 'i's are dotted with little hearts throughout, and the trailing tail of every 'f', 'g', 'j' and 'q' is a flourishing loop.

The date at the top of the letter is from nearly two years ago:

Love,

Yes. Remember this. When you think of me. If you can, without hate. That I love you.

I love you but I cannot be the woman you want me to be. For the longest time, I thought it was what I wanted as well, more than anything. Playing at being your wife was the happiest time of my life. But it was always just that: play. Play, as in something fun to do. But also play, as in a part, the role you gave me.

Whatever comes next, please please please remember that I loved you.

Just then, Daniel hears a noise from behind: the rattle of a door, directly behind him. Galen enters through the rear door, the one by the kitchen. He kicks his boots against the door frame, and asks, "What you got there, buddy?"

Daniel shoves the letters back, grabs the baking powder, turns and smiles. "This," he says. "Baking powder. You buried it deep."

Taking off his coat, hanging it on a hook by the back door, Galen says, "I don't bake. That was Amber's thing. She was quite the baker." Galen smiles with fond memory. "Not when I first met her. But she learned. She really got into that whole sourdough thing, through Covid. Her starter should still be around somewhere." Then, he sighs wistfully. "And she used to make these amazing little rolls—tea biscuits, she called them. And she learned a few French-Canadian recipes, too, for me. She'd roll out leftover dough, sprinkle it with sugar and cinnamon, roll it back and slice it up and bake, and you'd get these sweet little swirls." It's the

most animated Daniel's seen him, first miming rolling out the dessert then rubbing his hands together with pleasure at the memory. "Pete de Soeur," he says, grinning. "Nun's Farts."

Daniel closes the cabinet door. "Sound yummy."

"What you making?"

Blueberry pancakes, Daniel answers, bringing everything together on the counter: flour, sugar, baking powder and salt, and the wet ingredients, milk and eggs, oil, vanilla extract. Galen helps him find a mixing bowl and a Pyrex measuring jug, then leans back against the wall and watches. Daniel first measures out a cup of white flour and dumps it in the bowl. Then, he adds tablespoons of sugar, teaspoons of baking powder, and salt. He wipes his hands on the apron, pushes the mixing bowl towards Galen. He's been watching the proceedings with a little smile nearly hidden behind his beard.

"Make yourself useful if you're not heading back outside," Daniel says. "Get mixing."

"Actually, I was just—" he starts, until Daniel glares at him, and he laughs. "Yes, boss."

While Galen awkwardly cradles the bowl and lightly mixes the ingredients, Daniel cracks an egg into the glass jug. He hums as he works, some song, he's not sure what but he does the same at home, when he cooks. Now, he adds a tablespoon of oil, pours in a little milk, and whisks it all together. Then, a few drops of vanilla extract, and he fills the remainder of the jug with more milk. He stirs the wet ingredients together, then takes the bowl back from Galen. Using the fork, he forms a little well in the middle of the flour mixture, and slowly pours in the blended eggs, milk and oil. He folds the ingredients together, carefully. That's the trick, of course, to gently wet the ingredients, not mix them smooth. The batter needs texture. Otherwise, the pancakes come out flat and heavy.

Finally, he grabs the blueberries from the fridge, gives them a quick wash and pours them into the pancake batter. He turns on the stove and heats up a griddle pan hanging beneath the counter. While that's heating up, he grabs a pack of bacon he spotted in the fridge, throws a half dozen slices into another pan. Soon, the sizzle of bacon fills the cabin, joined a moment later by the scent of the first pancake. Two minutes on one side, flip, two more minutes and the first is done.

Galen reaches for the pancake and Daniel smacks his hand with the spatula. "Hands off, mister. Go make yourself useful and set the table." Daniel pops the first pancake in the oven, starts on the next. Soon, there's a nice stack of a half dozen pancakes, and the table set with a pair of plates, cutlery, a slab of butter and maple syrup in a glass jar.

Daniel wipes his hands on the apron. His stomach grumbles, and he feels a wash of pride mixed with pleasure. He hasn't cooked for anyone in weeks. Ninety-five percent of the time, he did the cooking at home for Chloe and himself. She didn't enjoy cooking, wasn't very good at it, either. Meanwhile, Daniel was forced to learn his way around a kitchen from an early age, and found the process soothing, in a way, the methodical and repetitive process of preparation and cooking. But in the past few months, Chloe had been working late—or out with work-related events—or, as he now realizes, probably fucking another man.

Midway to the table, pancakes in one hand and bacon in the other, Daniel falters. He feels dizzy, and his head throbs. In the moment, he feels the presence of his underwear, their tight compression against his genitals, and the pantyhose over them, their snug fit. Then the

apron, with its feminine frill, and he imagines himself, from the outside, food in both hands, carried to the table for a waiting man nearly twice his size. What the hell is he doing? Playing at housewife? And what's next, a cute 50s' style retro dress and heels, makeup and permed hair? This vision strikes him with such intensity that he gasps, and the room dips and sways with a sickening lurch.

Almost instantly, Galen is at his side. You okay there, buddy? His voice distant, but then Galen steadies him with a firm grip to the elbow, and at his touch the vertigo dissipates, as does the vision, and Daniel is left blushing.

"I'm sorry—" His voice breaks, and embarrassment washes over him. Galen grabs the plates of food, places them on the table, then guides Daniel by the elbow to a seat. Daniel doesn't resist. Galen hovers at his shoulder for a second and then sits opposite. He eyes him inquisitively. "I'm fine," Daniel insists. "I don't know what came over me."

There's doubt in his host's eyes, but he doesn't push the point. Instead, after a short hesitation, he picks up his fork and spears a pancake, then bacon. He lathers butter onto the hot pancake, then pours out maple syrup. He does all this in silence, and Daniel watches him. He squirms a little in his seat. His discomfort is only in part to the clothes he's wearing, or rather, those clothes accentuate his discomfort. For some reason, he's sporting a raging hardon. His arousal started with the earlier vision and only intensified when Galen took his elbow. Now, the mesh fabric rubbing against his genitals is felt as a pleasurable agony that leaves Daniel desperate to touch himself and somehow relieve his arousal. But he can't do that, not now. Instead, heat slowly crawls up his neck and his face flames red.

Galen's nearly done his first pancake when he notices. "Not feeling great, eh buddy?"

Daniel forces a smile. "I'm just—feeling a little hot—from cooking. I'll be fine. Could you grab me a glass of juice?"

Galen nods, stands, heads over to the fridge. Daniel takes advantage of the moment to reach down the front of his jeans. He slides his hand beneath the stretchy fabric of pantyhose and into the panties and surreptitiously adjusts himself. He suppresses a gasp at his own touch, bites his lower lip. The urge to do more is almost irrepressible. Instead, and trembling slightly, he grabs a pancake for himself, and bacon, and distracts himself with food. Galen returns with a glass of orange juice and the coolness of the drink helps, a little.

The maple syrup is dark and kept in a mason jar. He picks it up, looks to his host. "Local?"

Galen smiles, beams with pride. "Very." He jerks a thumb in the direction of his back yard. "I've got a dozen acres back there. During Covid, I got the idea in my head to start tapping the trees and set up a small syrup shack. Been keeping at it since." He indicates the jar. "That's last year's. I don't make much, just enough for myself. And a few friends. It makes for a great Christmas gift. And I sell some of it at the local market. It's not really a money-maker. But I enjoy it. It's a good excuse to take a walk in the spring, check the lines are okay."

They eat in silence after that. Galen quickly devours four, slathered in butter, bacon and syrup. Daniel manages two and half before his appetite gives out on him. They're good, he's proud of the way the pancakes came out, light and fluffy, dotted with bursts of blueberry. It can so easily go wrong, cooking in somebody else's kitchen. But he felt comfortable in Galen's kitchen, moving with almost practiced ease as he made the pancakes.

“That,” Galen says, pushing away from the table a little. “Was the best breakfast I’ve had in ages.”

Daniel smiles, feels a little pulse of warmth at the compliment. “It’s no big deal, just some pancakes. I mean, like, you probably saved my life out there, you know?” He laughs, a little awkwardly. “I mean that, quite literally. And you, putting me up like this? It’s incredibly generous. What’s breakfast compared to that? I’ve got to earn my keep, right? How about I take care of the meals while I’m here? I can tidy up a bit, too. I mean, it’s the least I can do.”

But Galen furrows his brow, and his chair creaks as he leans back in it. He folds his arms across his wide chest, and rumbles deep in his chest. It seems to take him a minute to gather his words, and when he speaks, he does so slowly, as though mulling each word over before letting it loose. “That was her apron, you know,” he says, looking directly at him. Daniel realizes he’s still wearing the apron, and blushes. “Amber always wore it in the kitchen. She had a few others but that was her favourite. She loved to cook, bake, this place, it felt so alive with her in it. The smells, I think that’s what I miss most, of whatever she was making but also of *her*, not that she wore heavy perfume but the scent of a girl, it fills a space, eh? And the sounds. She would sing or hum. As she cooked. Cleaned. Just her presence. The rustle of her skirts as she walked. This place is so much quieter now.

“I thought I was okay with that. I thought I was looking forward to this Christmas on my own. No. Not looking forward to. I thought I was ready for it. Up here.” Galen taps his right temple. Then, he holds his other hand over his heart. “And here. But I wasn’t.”

Looking out the window, Galen frowns. The fog outside is a little lighter, the mists thinning and the trees across the road only just visible. Everything is a white and sharp under snow. “So when you say, ‘the least you can do,’ I need you to understand, Daniel, that you being here, I don’t know, obviously it was unexpected, but for me, it feels like you ended up here for a reason. I think I *needed* you to be here, if that makes sense, like something brought you to this place. Taking care of that injury. Having someone to talk to last night. A job to do, today. And—life—in the kitchen, in this... home, again.”

A deep breath, released loudly, and Galen slowly drags his gaze back into the house, back to Daniel. The weight of that gaze fixes Daniel to the seat and robs him of breath. The other man’s eyes are brown and soft and shimmer with some deep, barely suppressed emotion, one so intense that Daniel nearly squirms in his seat. A discomfiting shiver runs up his spine and his stomach flutters. A powerful urge to run away seizes him but fixed by that gaze, he remains and feels the heat rise in his cheeks but also, and most discomfiting of all, below as well.

Galen stands, walks around the table and stands behind Daniel. He places his hand on his shoulder: heavy, comforting, yet somehow also tremulous, as though keeping it there comes with great effort. “Thank you, is what I’m trying to get at, buddy. You’re welcome to stay here as long as you need. To get better, I mean. And you don’t have to feel. That is. I don’t want you to. Uh. Do anything because you think you should. But.” There is a pause, and the hand on his shoulder tightens, and the words that follow escape as a sigh: “If you want to, if you want to cook, help tidy up” There is another pause, the sense of the man struggling with some powerful emotion. “I would really appreciate it.”

His presence looms over and behind him. Daniel reaches up and lays his hand over the other man’s. He hadn’t planned on doing this. It takes him by surprise. But now Daniel’s hand sits atop Galen’s, the other man’s hand large and his skin rough beneath his smooth palm. They

remain like that for some time. Daniel feels suffused with warmth, and a sudden desire to take the other man's hand and kiss it enters his mind. His eyes widen and his breath catches in his throat. He doesn't pull his hand back but is about to twist in his chair and confront Galen and say—he doesn't know what—and his heart pounds in his chest—but just before he moves, Galen retrieves his hand.

In silence, the man walks away. He takes his coat from the door, puts on his boots, and steps outside. A gust of cold air sweeps through the space between them. The door bangs shut.

Daniel shivers, alone. His hand remains at his shoulder. A moment ago, Galen's had been there. He finds that he misses the warmth, the weight and security of the other man's hand. He takes a deep breath, another. He notes, from some distance, that his breathing is faster than normal. His heart beats rapidly as well. The room itself feels distant. He sees himself, sitting and trapped, like a butterfly pinned to velvet. Distantly, he notices that he is once again painfully hard. From the moment the other man looked eyes with him, he felt an intense arousal that only grew with the man's approach and peaked when the man touched his shoulder. He couldn't speak, for the heat and excitement. Never has he felt such intense arousal. And certainly not for a man. No—never; and that realization comes tumbling down on him, the vague detachment that isolated Daniel from the physical acuteness of his feelings crashes like cresting waves on sharp rocks.

He is Daniel and beneath his jeans and hoodie, wear lilac panties and sheer pantyhose and a short hour ago, he wore pink lipstick, too. And now, following the touch of a man, he's left trembling with arousal, with a hard-on so intense he doesn't think he can stand, let alone flee—and flee where, with his car in a ditch and the roads blanketed with snow and a blinding fog over everything?

Holding his hand to his temple, he feels the wound beneath the bandage, the tender skin around the edges. It feels hot to the touch, a dull, faint ache that lacks intensity; the pain is as diffuse as the mists outside. And yet, Daniel knows his injury is to blame. It has to be. It has to be. He's not—gay; he's never felt any stirrings for a man, another man, before, no childhood friends, roommates, guys at work, some celebrity on the screen; never, no one. And—these feelings—the passivity and joyous domesticity—the pleasure at Galen's approval in the kitchen, the warm feeling of his gaze following his movement—and even now, remembering, he bites down on his lip, hard, and suddenly yearns for his touch, again.

No. What he needs, right now, is—

He doesn't know. He can't leave. He's got somewhere to go, his booking at the lodge, but he can't get there, not yet. He needs his car. He needs the roads to be clear.

He needs to get out of these fucking clothes.

Yes, that's it. These clothes, and by that he means the women's clothes, of course. His temple throbs, as if in sudden warning. Daniel grits his teeth. No, fuck this. He's not going to let some—what?—goddamn bump on the head—make him—what? Effeminate? And consequently, gushing over some man? Albeit, he grudgingly admits, a really nice man, with a broad chest, and strong arms, and a firm hand, that rests so easily on his shoulder.

Daniel bolts from his chair. In a fevered heat, he rushes upstairs, to the bedroom. He stands before the mirror. He is pale and his face is pale and shines with a faint sheen of sweat. This is not who he is. This is not who he wants to be. The hoodie comes off easily, as do the

jeans. He tosses them to one side. Now, he sees his reflection, the paleness of his skin offset by the subtle shading of the pantyhose. His legs look good; he hadn't noticed this before, or dared to notice. Better than good: sexy, he thinks, lithe and smooth, each line defined by the barely there black tint of hosiery. Fine, great: better on Chloe, or this woman of the past, Amber. But I'm not Amber, Daniel thinks. I shouldn't be wearing her clothes. And I'll be damned if I wear them any longer.

He sits at the edge of the bed, seizes the pantyhose by the waistband and tugs them down to his knees. Pain flares in his temple; he was expecting it, and grits his teeth. He rolls the hose down. The pain intensifies, coming in waves rolling down through his neck, his shoulders, each time centred on his temple. It doesn't matter. He fights through the pain, thinking, this isn't who I am, these are not my clothes. The pantyhose catches on his feet, his eyes water, and blinking he tugs the hosiery free, balls them up in his fist, trembling and then tosses them away, across the room.

How, he's down to the panties. Once enough on their own, they now barely suffice to keep the pain below the threshold where thought remains possible. A day ago, they felt weird and alien cradling his genitals, the loop of fabric tight between his bum cheeks, and sitting so strangely high on his hips. The discomfort's somehow faded across last night and this morning. Now, they sit comfortably. Their colour is as beautiful as ever, lilac and delicate butterfly embroidery and the glimmer of glass. But their colour and beauty and comfort isn't the issue. The fact that they're panties, that they belong on a woman, would look gorgeous on a woman, is the issue. He's not a woman, nor is he the kind of man who wears women's underwear.

And I'm not going to be, Daniel thinks. He squeezes his eyes shut, breathes deeply. He pushes through the fearful anticipation of pain. Stands. And in one swift movement, before there's time to react or doubt himself, he yanks the panties down to his ankle and kicks them away, across the room.

White light, a belly like water, legs hollow, giving out. Blind and gasping, like a fish left stranded by retreating tides. He alternates between curling into a tight ball, and flailing out, writhing, twisting across the floor. Agony beyond anything he could have imagined fills the entirety of his being and he makes small, animal noises. Something smashes to the ground. Sharp slivers prick his skin but go unheeded beyond the consuming pain flaring from his skull. His skull—temple—the place above his eye: yes! he thinks—in the briefest of intervals in which thought is possible—and he claws for his face, reaches for the pain with the basest and simplest of desires directing his movements: to rip and tear it out, the source of this unbearable pain. His nails dig into his flesh. Yes, and he digs deeper.

There's a loud bang, of a door being thrown open, and then a hand, strong and insistent, grabbing him by the wrist. No! he gasps, struggling against the irresistible force of the other, please, make it stop, please, it hurts so much and he's babbling these words, pinned to the ground, and through eyes blurred with tears he sees Galen over him, pinning him to the ground, and his presence alone creates a space within the whirling pain, a lull in which Daniel is able to gasp out, please, and Galen releases him, helps him as he crawls, on all fours, towards the dresser. The man helps him yank the drawer open. Daniel fumbles blindly within, and his hands close around something satiny, cool to the touch. That coolness spreads, like a soothing balm, up his arm, through his shoulder and neck and passes like a wave through his brain and the pain eases—just enough—for him to scrabble and struggle into the item. Galen helps him. There are straps and strings and hooks and then comforting tightness around his torso, like an unyielding,

firm hug and then there is—nothing—in fact the opposite—a sudden outpouring of euphoric pleasure so pleasurable in contrast to what came before that it leaves Daniel hugging himself and rocking with joy, with tears, beyond any idea of shame or humiliation at what he might be wearing.

Eventually, this too fades and he finds himself sitting on the floor, back to the bed, with his thighs held tight to his chest and his arms holding them close. His forehead rests against his knees. He is left feeling tired and weak, like a bird newly hatched, exhausted by the struggle to be free of its shell. A deep well has opened up within him, and into it has drained all his energy, as well as resistance, but also shame or humiliation. The other side of pain has left him empty. Better this—whatever *this* may be—than *that*, pain beyond the veil, immolation perpetually lurking behind his right eye.

When his breathing has calmed enough, he lifts his head and opens his eyes. Galen crouches next to him, his expression one of fear and worry.

“You—” Galen starts, and concern steals his voice. He tries again: “You okay there, buddy?” and he reaches out with his hand.

Daniel takes the offered hand and holds on to it tightly.

“No,” he says. “I’m not.”

Chapter Four

“And it’s been like this ever since I woke up.”

Daniel sits on the floor, with his back to the bed. Galen has taken a chair from the corner and pulled it closer. The large man leans forward, elbows on knees, and has listened without interruption as Daniel tries to explain the past few days. Starting with waking up after the crash, Daniel walked his host through the first instance of debilitating pain, and the solution he found, namely those pretty indigo panties, now balled up in a corner of the room. He rambles, tells him about all the ways the human body, brain, can go wrong and maybe this is like that, some weird misfiring of the brain, like—the name suddenly came to him—Phineas Gage and the blasting rod through the skull, how afterwards he was “no longer Gage,” a changed man, and maybe Daniel, too, that knock to the front of his head, he’s “no longer Daniel.” At least for now, and maybe that explains how last night in his drunkenness, he wore the babydoll to bed and enjoyed the deepest, best night’s sleep he could recall in months. After that, the challenge of the shower, lipstick and then the escalation, not just panties but hosiery, too, secretly worn under his masculine clothes this morning.

What he doesn’t tell Galen is what led to his decision to try and strip off these clothes and overcome the pain. His failed attempt—another failure, further evidence of his weakness, his stupidity—but after breakfast, he just *had* to try. Because the other feelings that rose in him—the ones he can’t share with Galen—earlier in the morning, and how these feelings delighted and terrified him in equal measure—the lingering sensation of the other man’s touch—and the aching arousal that followed—the desire, yes, the intense *want* for his touch to remain and perhaps, even—

Daniel squeezes his eyes shut and buries his forehead between his knees. During the telling, there’d been ample time to determine what item he’d blindly snagged from the drawer and, with Galen’s help, struggled into, even as he thrashed with pain. It was the corset—of *course* it was the corset, Daniel thought morosely—pale pink with white trimming, gorgeously decorated with an embroidered pattern of floating cherry blossoms. The corset sits sloppily over his slender frame. In the rush to pull it on, the laces were left loose. And yet, he feels the boning push in against his ribs, and gentle insistent pressure. It is this pressure, the presence of satin coolness and the tickle of dangling garters against his thighs, that keeps the pain at bay.

“And I’m sorry,” Daniel says, finally looking up but still unable to meet the man’s gaze. “I am, really, I shouldn’t have touched her clothes, your wife’s... underwear. You must—” Daniel released a held breath explosively. “You must think I’m some kind of sick pervert.”

“No.” It’s the first thing Galen’s said since entering the room and finding his guest writhing in pain on the floor. His voice is stern, and he leans forward, a flash of anger in his eyes. Daniel starts at the reaction, even as he feels another powerful reaction at the man’s deep voice. “We don’t use that word in this house.”

“But—”

“No.” Galen repeats the word louder than before. “Listen. Buddy. I don’t know what’s going on here. I really don’t. I’ve seen plenty of injuries in my time. I’ve seen more than enough for a lifetime. But I’ll be honest, I’ve never heard of something like this before.”

Daniel winces. “You think I’m making this up.”

"No." Galen shakes his head, slowly, and the earlier anger dissipates, and he leans back in his chair, once again calmly observing with those large, placid eyes. The feeling of that gaze upon him, even in his morose state, sends a pleasurable tingle racing through his belly. He is aware that other than the loosely-fitting corset, he remains naked. He squeezes his knees together and wriggles a little in place.

"Just because I've never heard of it," Galen continues, "doesn't make it any less real. That's a nasty bump you've got on your head. I've never seen a head injury make a man want to wear women's clothing. But I've seen a head injury do far worse. A lot worse. If this is all there is too it?" He scratches at his beard contemplatively, and for a moment seems elsewhere. "Count yourself lucky."

An angry laugh escapes Daniel. "Sure. Easy for you to say. You're not the one wearing panties."

"Neither are you, buddy," Galen answers dryly. "But you're right, it's easy to say, and no, I'm not. But consider this. You're not blind, you're not bleeding out on your brain. You're not in a coma. Hell, even the pain's manageable, from what you say. Maybe not the way you'd like to manage it," he adds quickly, raising his hands placatingly, "but as for that?" Galen shrugs. "I honestly don't care what you wear."

"I—" He blinks, swallows his instinctive, angry response. "You don't?"

Galen shakes his head slowly.

"But—" Daniel pats the corset, rests his hands over its cinched waist. "These belong to your wife."

Galen nods. "True." He nods again, slower this time. Slowly, he lowers his hands to his knees, rests them there, and his finger clench and unclench as he methodically seems to approach some kind of decision. "She's gone, Daniel." He says this matter-of-factly, but in a slightly awed tone. "She'll never wear that corset again." Suddenly, he surges to his feet, crosses the room in a few, long, determined steps. He yanks open the top drawer. "She'll never wear any of these again." His hand dives in, comes out clutching a bundle of panties in a rainbow of colours. He holds them aloft, and anger and sadness now animate his features. He tosses the panties to the floor. "Or these," and he yanks out a handful of bras, throws them away. "Any of this, all of this, none of it, she'll never wear any of it again," and with each word, more clothes are pulled from their careful storage, held up, thrown away. "She's gone, Daniel," and his voice comes out as a growl, a cry, and when he says 'Daniel' he could just as well be saying 'Galen'.

At least, that's how it feels to Daniel as he watches the man storm across the room, to the closet. Daniel calls out, softly, "stop."

The man acts as if he doesn't hear, yanks open the closet door. Dresses and skirts flutter in the sudden wind of his motion, and a faint scent—of flowers, maybe—wafts into the room. Galen is reaching for the first dress when Daniel calls out again, louder, struggling to his feet, one hand on the bed. "Stop!"

Galen spins to face him. His face is red, his eyes shimmer with tears. A great big vein stands out across his forehead. Daniel feels a thrill of—fear, what else could it be—but stands firm, swaying slightly, his free hand clutching the corset to his frame. It slips, slightly and a

warning echo of pain emanates from his temple, and he winces, wavering. Instantly, Galen is at his side, full of concern, catching him under the shoulder.

With a firm grip, he eases Daniel onto the edge of the bed. Daniel smiles gratefully, holds the corset tighter to his torso and the pain eases. He smiles, wanly. "Thanks."

"I shouldn't have done this." Galen inspects the mess he's made of the room. He returns to his seat, slowly sinks into it. There's a deep rumble in his chest, and he holds his palm to his forehead. For a moment, he appears to be on the verge of tears. He passes his hand across his face, releases a deep sigh. Then, he seems okay again.

"For three years, I've kept her room. Exactly as it was the day I lost her. For nearly three years now, this room has been perfectly preserved. Like a fly trapped in amber." He forced a hard, little smile. "Ha. Trapped in amber. Get it?"

"But it's not the room, is it? It's me, and I've also been caught in time, waiting for—" His eyes dart over to Daniel, and he trails off, and shakes his head. "I don't know. Something."

"And all this time, this room, the bathroom, her clothes, everything, it's just as it's always been. I get a cleaner to come in, because I can't do it myself. The first time I came in here, after she was gone, I—didn't do very well. Although now, sometimes I come in here and. Remember. Open a drawer, look in the closet. Stand by the window and imagine how she used to sit here, and paint. Or I'll sit on the bed—right there—where you are now. Close my eyes and listen. Just listen, and sometimes, I don't know why, it feels as if she's here, with me. I could feel her warmth, or smell her even, and the sound of her laughter, or her voice, faint, like she's just in there, taking a bath and singing softly to herself, or coming up the stairs."

He lapsed into silence. Daniel waits. Idle hands find a single black stocking left lying limply over the side of the bed, tossed there by Galen's earlier anger. Silently, he picks it up. He feels the gossamer fabric between finger and thumb. The tactile feeling of the silky smoothness soothes him, and the slight impression of pain in his head recedes further.

Eventually, Galen sighs again. He claps his hands down on his thighs, looks up, and fixes Daniel with a crooked grin that does nothing to hide the sadness in his eyes. "But she's gone. She'll never sleep in that bed again, or wear any of these clothes."

Daniel holds up the stocking for Galen to see. "And so..." He trails off, stares at the garment in his hand. "I should, what, just wear her stuff? And you're okay with that?"

"Why wouldn't I be?"

"Other than the fact it's all Amber's stuff? I'm a guy, Galen. Wearing this stuff is—wrong."

Galen nodded. "I see." He indicated the corset, the stocking in Daniel's hand. "Are you hurting anybody by wearing any of that?"

Other than myself? Daniel thought, and grimaced. "No."

"Then I don't see the problem." He scratches at his beard and nods once more. "Listen, buddy. I'd like to show you something downstairs. But first, let's get you dressed, eh?"

Sighing, Daniel stood up. With it already on, Daniel decides to stick with the corset. Obviously, he'd never worn anything like this before. Chloe had worn one for him, once, a flimsier, more playful item, early in their relationship. Black, with plastic boning and mesh

fabric, garters and stockings: just thinking of it now raised a prickling of sweat across the back of his neck. But also, a heaviness in his heart, that she only did it the once, but also that he'll never again see her naked body.

Now, he's the one wearing the corset, and one very different from Chloe's boudoir item. This one is far more elaborate and ornate, but sturdier as well. As if in a dream, he scans the floors and its scattered clothing and retrieves a clean pair of panties. He wants to believe that he picks the first pair he sees, but knows he hasn't. There are plenty to choose from, but he chooses one that pairs with the corset, a matching pale pink with decorative white trim and an embroidered pattern of floating cherry blossoms in a deeper pink. He slides them on. At least this pair isn't a thong, but the way the silky bottom embraces and displays his ass is nearly as bad.

Then, he gets Galen help to him. After all, he can't secure the corset without another set of hands. First, the man passes him a simple cotton singlet, to wear beneath. With the corset loose, he's able to slip it on. Then, Galen stands behind him and begins to pull on the strings. With each gentle tug, the corset slowly tightens its grip around Daniel.

"I bought this for her ten years ago, about six months into us being together. She really wanted one, a corset that is. Made to order in England and everything. Cost way more than I could afford at the time, let me tell you, but she wanted it, she really did and I couldn't say no, could I?" He laughs. "She loved it. Her delight when she unwrapped it, man, if you could bottle that, you'd be rich." Daniel can't see him, but hears the smile, the remembered joy, in the man's voice. "That Christmas, I swear, it's all she wore. I won't pretend to understand. But it made her very happy. Personally, I thought it looked damned uncomfortable, but what do I know? She loved the way it looked, and I loved the way it looked on her. But mostly, she loved what it did to her figure, how it made her feel. That's what she said, anyways."

How wonderful for her, Daniel thinks, as the garment draws in around his torso. It begins to gently squeeze him. Breathe in, Galen orders. Daniel does, and the laces pull tighter, and when he goes to release the breath, he finds that he can't, not easily anyway, and for a moment he feels dizzy and overwhelmed by what happened. His arms and legs feel weak, and his stomach queasy, as though worried by the unfamiliar pressure.

"Easy there, buddy." Galen steadies him with a hand on his shoulder, then works swiftly, with surprisingly nimble fingers, at tying off and tidying up the laces. What initially felt too tight already begins to relax. Daniel realizes the corset is just tight enough to sit secure against him, without slipping, and only slightly impedes his breathing. But it's not the tightness that steals his breath. It's the sight of himself in the mirror, middle gripped in pink, and his cheeks too, flushed as looming over him, in reflection, this large man with strong hands fixing the corset to him. Job done, Galen takes him by the waist. He holds him with both large, strong hands at the waist. Daniel feels those hands, firm and confident and masculine, as a pressing warmth divided from his skin by the thin but unyielding barrier of the corset. A man's hands, holding him with almost intimate familiarity.

"Relax," Galen instructs, but how? And neither does Galen sound nor seem relaxed, standing awkwardly behind him, with his hands resting on the smaller man's nipped in waist, his corset-induced curves.

It's too much. A few days ago, he was a sad, angry man fleeing his home for a solitary holiday from the remains of his life—but he'd still felt himself a man, not some effeminate—

pervert—he was told not to use that word, but it’s what he feels like. A man in lingerie, submitting to another man’s touch. He draws in a deep breath to—shout, maybe, or even break away and run—but feels the corset’s restraint—shudders, chokes on the breath, and suddenly the room tilts, and he sways, and falls backwards into Galen, who catches him. He’s big, and strong, catches him easily, and yet not quite fast enough. Daniel’s arm sways back as he slumps in Galen’s embrace, and his hands fall, and rests, against the man’s groin. And he feels it, the hardness there, a fleeting touch, and yanks his hand back, as if burnt.

“I think—” Galen’s voice catches in his throat. “You can take it from here.” Without another word, and without making eye contact, he leaves the room, pulling the door closed behind him. Daniel strains to listen and realizes that the man stands directly outside the door. There is a long pause, the creak of wooden floor, and finally a slow, heavy tread down the stairs. Daniel takes a shuddering breath, sits again on the edge of the bed. There’s a fine sheen of sweat across his brow. And his hand feels hot, too.

He takes some time to compose himself. This takes several minutes. First, he adjusts his breathing to the new restrictions imposed by the corset. It’s really not so bad. Rather than a vice, it feels more like an insistent, incessant hug. When he finally finds the strength to stand, he stands in front of the mirror and can’t help but admire the item he wears. It really is a beautiful piece of lingerie. If only Chloe had worn stuff like this more often. He passes his hand over the corset’s surface. The boning is stiff and unyielding, but the outer layer is satiny and soft, the pink more of a soft blush, and the embroidered pattern of fluttering leaves shimmer slightly. Detachable garters dance against his bare thighs. The corset ends just beneath his bust, or lack thereof. He imagines Chloe’s breasts, over the pink band of the corset. The fullness of her naked flesh, topped with full nipples, a slight jiggle with every step. Fuck. Now he’s hard, too.

And now, his hand curls and uncurls. There’s no denying what he felt. His hand, and the hardness beneath it. Standing behind him. Galen, aroused. By what? The memory of his dead wife? Or by the act of lacing Daniel into a corset? Was his host getting off on the gradual feminisation of his guest’s clothing? He stops, looks at his hand. The lightness of his touch. The size of what he felt, its firmness. Then, he turns his gaze back to the mirror. What he wears is embarrassing, emasculating. But also, rapturously beautiful. Feminine, yes, but even in that, the shaping it enforces is minimal, only a slight nipping in of the waist, maybe an inch at most. Turning slightly, he sees the cross-hatching of laces, the tucked bows, the gap between each edge, several centimetres wide, allowing for further cinching. There’s no way he’s getting this thing off without help, he realises. He rests his hands on his waist, fingers spread and feels the memory of the other hands that rested there moments ago.

He smiles. Shakes his head. He tries to force a frown. It refuses to come. Because there’s no pain, he realizes; or at least, the pain that lurks behind his eye is so minimal as to be laughably insignificant, compared to what he knew before. His little smile grows to a grin, to a wide, silent laugh. His insides may be squeezed, but this is the freest his soul has felt in days, maybe weeks.

Galen sits in the living room, by the bookshelf, when Daniel finally comes downstairs. Daniel imagines he sees a flash of disappointment in the man’s eyes. He’s wearing a fresh pair of jeans, button-down shirt and thin V-neck sweater, over the corset. He’s also wearing stockings, clipped to the dangling garters. He could’ve detached the garters but feared damaging the

corset. Besides, he wasn't sure he'd be able to get pantyhose on, what with the corset already being on. But attaching those stockings took fucking forever. First, he was terrified of tearing them. They were gossamer thin, delicate wisps with wide, embroidered tops. And rolling them up each leg was difficult, restrained as he was by the corset. Once in place, the clips at the front were easy enough. The ones at the side took a little more effort, the silicon tab popping free more than once. But it took a solid ten minutes of twisting—awkwardly, stiffly—and craning, to attach the stockings at back. In the end, he had to bend forward and reach between his legs and make several fumbling attempts before the stockings stayed. Even now, he's sure one of them hangs loose in the back. Fucking things. How do women do it?

Though, of course, they don't, Daniel thinks, at least not the women he knows. Kara, his sister, wouldn't be caught dead in stockings, hates pantyhose even, she's always been all about comfort. And Chloe grudgingly wears nylons for work, but stockings were definitely a bedroom thing, a special-occasion treat, worn more for him than for herself. Still. He remembers her, one leg raised, resting against the edge of the bed, toes pointed as she leaned forwards, rolling the first of the stockings he's once bought her, lips curved in a knowing smile, garters bright against her thigh. Her breasts, in their lacy cups. The glimmer of her lips. God. And now he's the one in lingerie, and stockings too.

And they feel—similar but different—to yesterday's pantyhose. The welt is a constant presence across his upper thigh. The stockings slide within his jeans with every step, as yesterday, but now with the added reminder of the garter's tabs. The sensation must be heightened by shaved legs, and he's very aware, at times, of his sparse leg hair as a buffer between the nylon and his legs. What must it feel like, these things, as a direct caress to the skin. A pity he'll never know. Nevertheless, at rest, hands in pockets, he slides fingertips along the wide, decorative lace trim at the top of each stocking. Or, hands on hips, he touches the garter tabs through his jeans. The bumps feel visible. Yet he assiduously checked himself in the mirror before stepping out the bedroom. He couldn't see them. But they *feel* visible, rising with every step.

"How you doing there, buddy?"

Daniel smiles. "Alright. It's less uncomfortable than I thought it would be. Just—different." Very different, and he feels squeezed and compressed and caressed with every motion, but it's not *painful*, with time he'll get used to it, he thinks. He won't be running any marathons or engaging in any heavy labour, but that wasn't exactly today's plan, anyway. He is mindful of the way he moves, though, and more aware of bumping into things, rubbing up against hard surfaces—he doesn't want to tear those stockings, after all. "Can you tell? That I'm wearing—um, you know—under my clothes?"

Galen watches him descend the stairs, closely and the intensity of his gaze again raises a light pink flush to Daniel's cheeks, but the man doesn't seem to notice. "No." He scratches at his beard. "Maybe a little. Only because I know. You're moving a little more stiffly. Also, your posture's better. You tend to slouch, did you know that?"

"You try spending sixty hours a week bent over a drafting table, see what it does to your posture."

Outside, the fog has mostly cleared and the light of late morning glimmers, trapped in short, stubby icicles rimming the top of each window. Water drips for their tips. From his seat by the bookshelf, Galen indicates Daniel should take a seat at the kitchen table. The man sits with

a photo album in his lap. He closes it and sets it aside. "Let's have a look at your forehead," he says. Daniel does as told, and the simple act of sitting reminds him of what he wears beneath his masculine clothes. He feels the garter tabs press into the underside of his thighs, and the garters themselves stretch taut. He can't help but squirm a little and sits, with his knees pressed together, aware it makes him seem a little prim, straight backed and attentive, like a schoolgirl intent on making a good impression with a new teacher.

Meanwhile, Galen retrieves a first aid kit from the pantry and lays it on the table. He grabs a seat and pulls it closer. Their knees bump. Daniel's breath catches in his throat, and he swallows it down, forces himself to keep calm. His heart beats loudly, and it feels as though Galen must hear it. What's wrong with me? he thinks. These feelings, I've never reacted like this before around another guy. But then he considers how this man, he's saved his life, taken him in, cared for him. Of course, he feels gratitude. It'd be—weird; yes that's right, downright sociopathic *not* to feel some kind of warm appreciation for everything he's done.

Meanwhile, the man in question is intent on the task at hand. Carefully, he peels away the earlier dressing. The edges are still a little damp from the shower that morning. It comes away easily. Galen releases a low whistle.

"What?" Daniel reaches up involuntarily. "What is it?"

Galen catches his hand. "Don't touch. It's not that bad. Just...impressive. Here, I'll take a photo." Once he passes the phone over, Daniel can see the injury for himself. Over his right eye, the bump is around twice the size of a bluejay's egg. It looks swollen and a little soft, an angry, deep purple yellowing towards the edges. The skin looks sensitive but is otherwise unbroken. Burst blood vessels create an impression of tendrils coiling towards his eye, forehead, behind his ear. Daniel lets out a little gasp. "Christ." His instinct is to prod the injury, but Galen holds his hand firmly. In comparison, Daniel's hand feels small.

With a touch so careful and delicate it feels like a lover's, Galen sweeps Daniel's hair back, tucks it behind his ear. He soaks a pad of gauze in saline and cleanses the area. Daniel hisses in anticipation but there is no pain, an impression of wetness over his eye. Galen nods approvingly. Gentle warmth unfurls in Daniel's belly, and he feels a faint glimmer of pride, remembers falling off his bike as a child, skidding out on gravel, holding back tears as his father cleaned the scrape on his knee, the reassuring presence, the pat to the head. Lost in the memory, he's only dimly aware as Galen aligns a sterile dressing over the wound, begins to tape it in place. The man does this with practiced ease.

"Is it getting better?"

Galen nods.

"Do you think—" Daniel pauses. "That all this, um," and he holds his palm flat against his flank, feels the corset's boning through his sweater, "the compulsion, it might go away when the bump goes away?"

The man shrugs.

Daniel sighs, taps the first aid box. "Learn this in the army?"

Galen rumbles somewhere deep in his chest. "Saw the photos, eh?"

"Yeah."

“Hmm.” A final firm press, a nod of satisfaction, and Galen leans back in his chair. “Combat first aid,” he says. “Basic training. It’s a funny kind of medical training. As much about setting up a defensive perimeter as assessing degree of injury, who can be saved, who’s too far gone. First day, they had me tending a sucking chest wound, a man shot through the lung. Pretend, obviously. On my turn, I had a bullet through here.” He taps his neck. “Main artery. Instant death. The guy practicing on me wasted time trying to revive me. Got told off for it. And they forgot to set up a guard. The whole squad got shot up. Failed the assessment.

“Anyway. That was early in my training. I enlisted with the Northern Pioneers—that’s the regiment up this way if you don’t know—the day I finished high school.” His smile is a little strained, it seems to Daniel, and from the timbre of the man’s voice he gets the impression of another story, something painful or unresolved, underlying that decision. “Literally. We had our graduation ceremony. Then, I walked the mile to the recruitment office and did the physical. I signed the dotted line then and there. And left and walked to the grad party out at Jimmy’s gravel pit, on the outskirts of town, down by the lake.

“I was a real jerk, that night. Trying to impress people. Girls. Showing off. Talking shit about being a man, how I was going to go overseas and—after a few drinks—how I was going to kill baddies. Shoot Arabs. Single-handedly take down Daesh. Not that we called it that back then.” He shakes his head. “I was eighteen. And very stupid.”

“Did you?” Daniel asks in a quiet voice. “Um. Go overseas, I mean.” He thinks of the picture he saw last night, beige and yellow, sand and dust. “And, you know—” but seeing a flash in his host’s eyes, trails off.

“A word of advice, buddy.” Galen’s voice remains calm, but there’s a steely edge to it. “Someone tells you they were in the army, went overseas? Don’t ask them if they killed anyone. Maybe, if they want to share that story, they will. When they’re very drunk, probably. You might be digging into memories best left buried.”

Silence settles between them. Galen finishes, sit backs with an air of satisfaction, closes the first aid kit. Daniel holds a hand to his forehead, feels the dressing. “Thank you,” he says. “And—sorry.”

“Yeah.” His smile is thin and febrile. Then, he brightens, his smile softens and there’s a glint to his eyes. “But hey, enough that. There’s something I want to show you.”

The chair scrapes against the floor as he stands. Galen walks back to the living room and picks up the album from earlier. A moment later, Daniel joins him. He feels a little trepidation, though he’s not sure why. Probably, the man wants to show him pictures of Amber. Fair enough; but he feels uncomfortable, looking at photos of a dead woman while wearing her underwear. Galen drops onto the sofa, pats the space next to him.

Feeling a slight pinch from the corset, Daniel settles carefully onto the cushion. He feels more than a little dainty in doing so. Crossing his legs at the knee, the garters pull taut. And whether it’s the presence of Galen, so close, or the gentle tug of the stockings, or the constant pressure of the corset, or the snug compression of the panties: he can’t tell, but Daniel suddenly feels flushed and a little faint, a red blush crawling up his chest. Sweat dots the back of his neck, and he feels himself grow hard. He bites his lip, and sits on his hands, as Galen, frustratingly, fortunately unaware of any of this, flips through the photo album.

“Here we go,” he says, in a happy tone underscored with pride. He tilts the album towards Daniel. “My girl.”

The first picture is one of posed domestic bliss: she stands by a counter in a breezy, pale blue dress with short sleeves, a nipped in waist and a little frill along the hem and neckline. Over the dress, she wears an apron, and Daniel recognizes the apron as the one he wore this morning. The kitchen in the picture is the same as the one behind him now. There are white slip-on shoes with a little heel, and her lips are very red. Cradled in her arm is a medium-sized bowl, and she brandishes a spatula, laden with a thick batter, towards the camera. Flour dusts her apron, and dots of batter on her cheek, the tip of her nose. Her expression is a moue of mock outrage under soft brown hair that nearly reaches her shoulders.

Galen flips the page. Now, she’s outside, its autumn and the leaves behind her a riot of reds and yellows, a glorious eruption of colour. She wears slim jeans and a knit sweater that does more to accentuate her figure than hide it. Leaves fall about her like rain and her face is lifted upwards, and she is smiling, smiling, arms spread wide, hair fanning out as she turns.

With each picture, they move steadily back in time. Amber in a fairy dress, twirling, hair in pink ribbons. Amber in a little black dress and heels, on a night out, with smoky eyes and a glittery purse slung over one bare shoulder. Amber in what appears to be a hospital gown, face pale, determined, scared. Amber in tight, pale blue jeans, hips cocked to one side, and a simple white t-shirt that leaves her slim belly exposed, bellybutton piercing glinting in the light. Her small breasts push out the thin shirt, and she sticks her tongue out at the camera.

Finally, Galen pulls two Polaroid photos from their sleeve in the album, the first page of the album. He passes them over to Daniel and watches him, expectantly. Daniel examines the photos. They’re both of the same girl, the second a closeup of the girl’s face. She very young, maybe only seventeen or eighteen, and rail thin. Pink heeled sneakers, legs long and gleaming in a pair of purple hot pants, t-shirt equally tight and her hair is long and blonde, a little straggly and dyed with purple streaks, done up in a ponytail. In close-up, her eyes smoulder with a kind of insolent defiance. Nose stud, tongue and horizontal eyebrow piercing, and her makeup is blacks, deep purples, a real contrast to the pastels and gentler femininity of her later photos. A sort of gleeful sullen petulance animates her features, in the curl of thin lips, shimmering with thickly applied gloss, as she rolls her tongue around a red, wet lollipop.

“That was the night I first met her,” Galen says. Daniel glances up at him. The man sounds proud, and he looks down at the polaroids fondly. But equally, he’s expecting something from Daniel. He looks at the photos again. And there is something there beyond the sulky sneer. It takes him a moment to notice it, but then he flips forwards a few pages, looks, slowly goes back in time and sees it, now, the transformation. With each backwards turn of the page, Amber grows younger. But also, her breasts shrink, and her waist thickens, and behind the makeup and gloss and longer hair and youth and attitude, her chin fills out, nose too, her every feature growing heavier, less girlish even as she retreats into her youth.

He sees it now, though it seems impossible. His throat tightens, his mouth is dry. Eventually, he manages to say, “Amber was a boy?”

“No.” Galen’s voice is firm, brooks no argument. “She was never a boy. Doctors may have assigned her male at birth, but she was always a girl.”

He's seen this kind of thing before, of course. He lives in Toronto, after all. There's a vibrant queer culture, Pride parades and he's got a few gay colleagues, one of the women on his team is lesbian. And he's fine with that, of course, live and let live, though sometimes it makes him a bit uneasy, all the flamboyance, men kissing in the streets, does it have to be so in-your-face? Because it's everywhere, now that he thinks about it, all that stuff on the television, game shows, so-called reality shows, drag races and whatever. Also what's his—her, name, that Olympic athlete turned Kardashian; Bruce, no, Caitlin; that's right, was that when it all went mainstream? Yet for all its ubiquitousness, he's never met a—trans person, that's the word for it, a transexual. At least, he doesn't think he has. But then, if they looked like Amber, how would he know? Surely there must be some tell, something in the voice, a gesture that gives it away?

And it strikes him as kind of surprising, that he's never knowingly met a transperson, considering it's such a big issue, trans rights and everything, you'd think they were everywhere, lurking in every single-gender space. Transwomen—and men, though the issue never seems to be about them, no one's worried about stealth vaginas in the men's room, it's always about rogue dicks in the girls' room.

At least, he assumes so. It's not something he really follows but it's hard not to have at least a passing awareness, after all, the world's a cesspool, especially south of the border, they've gone nuts about this stuff in the States. And across the pond, too. He's read of some pretty shitty stuff happening overseas, craziness about toilets, and that Harry Potter woman turning nasty. But it's always been a whole other world, running parallel to his own of which he has at best a passing awareness, present but distant and vague and never bisecting his lived experience.

Going back through the photo album, he can see the changes, some of it gradual and subtle, at other times less so. Time passes between the first image and the last, pages as years, the gradual dissipation of what was, and what could be, into lived reality. Skinny effeminate boy in hot pants into—Daniel's fingers rest on the photo—blushing bride; and he blushes a little, too, feels a little hot in his corset, to imagine that such a transformation is even possible.

"I'll have to tell you how we met sometime. She was being such a brat." Galen smiles. "Anyway. That's a story for another time. Let's just say, I loved her from the very first moment I saw her." Galen takes the album back, rests his fingertips lightly over the wedding photo. Amber is radiant in white, veil pushed back over hair woven with little crystals that sparkle like stars in her hair. The dress is embroidered with a filigree pattern that shimmers in the sun, with a plunging neckline that shows off an impressive cleavage, and clings to her curves. She stands demurely, nestled in her husband's arms, eyes downcast. Looking at the picture, it seems impossible to imagine that this new wife had ever been a man. "It wasn't easy." Galen taps the photo. "Getting to this point. It took a lot of work."

Daniel nods as though he understands. He remembers the letter he read this morning: *I cannot be the woman you want me to be*. Then he thinks of Chloe. Had he been trying to make her into someone she wasn't? Or—had she, him? He said 'a lot of work' but when he thinks back of the years spent with Chloe, none of it felt like work. Fun, at the start, exhilarating even, always underscored by this sense of disbelief, like he couldn't believe his luck, that he'd somehow met this incredible, intelligent, sexy woman and that somehow, against all the odds, she actually seemed to like him, too. And while that first year hadn't been easy, finding their feet in a world that actively seemed to hate young people, it was their relationship that sustained them.

As for this most recent year—their *last* year, it seemed, and Daniel fought down rising sadness, a lump in his throat—he could see how they’d grown distant, how work distracted him, and life, his father, and what followed with his sister. And maybe that was it: he just hadn’t worked hard enough at what mattered. He thought it was his job. But he’d been wrong.

Galen also seems lost in thought, smiles distantly. Daniel shifts a little further down the sofa. “How do you mean?” he asks. “Work?”

“Amber was—how do I put this? Confused. And angry. I saw, clear as day, the woman she wanted to be, who she really was, right from the very beginning. She didn’t. There was a lot of self-hatred, and shame. At who she was, who she wanted to be. I helped her, helped her find that girl—*this* girl—“and he taps the bridal photo, “and find peace with that. She needed guidance, help, sometimes a firm hand—her life hadn’t been an easy one, you see.

“There’s a lot of her past she never told me. I only saw the pain she was willing to share. But it’s not difficult to imagine. Growing up in a place like Chippewa Bay. I love my home. The people here are wonderful, they really are. But.” He spread his hands over his knees, palms facing up, and shrugged. “For Amber, it was a different experience, growing up here. A lack of… understanding, I guess, from others. From family, schools—she bounced between them, a lot—grownup and kids, especially boys. A girl who looks like a boy; but of course, they saw a boy who acted like a girl, thought it was weird, or weakness. There was a lot of bullying. Even when she was with me, people were often—” he sighs. “Unkind.

“And she could be unkind, too. Lashing out. Especially at me, in that first year. We were both very stubborn. I knew what I wanted. I wanted her, with absolute certainty. I told her I loved her. She didn’t like that. She didn’t want to be loved. She made fun of me for loving her, for being so open. Laughed in my face. Insulted me. Told me she was going to take advantage of me, use my money, abuse me.” Galen shrugs. “And she did, she did all of those things. But she kept coming back. And I waited for her, every time. Eventually, I didn’t have to wait any longer because she stayed, she stayed with me.”

“And you got married,” Daniel says.

“And we got married.”

“It’s a beautiful picture.” He forces a smile for his host. “It’s a beautiful dress she’s wearing.”

“Thank you,” Galen says. “I chose it for her.” He closes the photo album, returns it to bookshelf. He stands there for a moment, holding onto the wooden frame, and when he turns, there’s a distant, wistfully look to his eyes. He looks down at Daniel, scratches at his beard. “You know, you remind me of her.”

“I—” Daniel chews his bottom lip for a moment, and his cheeks feel hot. “I’m not sure how to—I suppose you mean that as a compliment? But I feel like, the fact that I’m, you know, the fact I’m wearing her clothes, Galen, and because of this hurt on my head,” and he tapped the fresh dressing, and remembered the attentive care, the gentle touch of the other man, “that you might, I don’t know, maybe you’ve got the wrong impression of me. I’ve never, that is, not even for Halloween or anything, worn stuff like this before, or even wanted to, I really haven’t.”

Which is true: he’s never secretly tried on his sister’s clothes or pulled his mother’s out of storage. And those times, early in their relationship, when Chloe wanted to try a little cross-

play in the bedroom, tried slipping her shiny green satin negligee over him, or strap him into a lacy, black basque: c'mon, it'll be fun, she said, you'll look so cute, let's role-play, and she giggled, I'll even get out my old cheerleading outfit. He refused, of course, fearing—something, he never quite knew what, knowing only that her playful request made him break out in a cold sweat, and that it was embarrassing, even in the privacy of their bedroom, a sort of voluntary weakness. He didn't want her to see him like that. And when she kept pushing, he got angry, and then she never asked again.

Daniel looks up at the large man. "This is already so embarrassing, I wouldn't want you to think that I—"

"Why is it embarrassing?" Galen cuts him off, smiles gently. "They're just clothes, buddy."

Daniel snorts. "I don't see you wearing them."

He contemplates that for a moment, scratching his beard. "Not these days, true. But I have. Amber had me play housewife for whole weekends sometimes. Found me this vintage 50s style dress and everything." He smiles at the memory. "It was fun. It was important to her. Mind, I was terrible at it. I'm good at tidying up. Very good at making the beds. Total disaster in the kitchen. We had to order in supper."

It's impossible to imagine him in a dress, in a retro housewife's outfit. Daniel imagines a light dress with polka dots, or some other pattern, puffed out skirts, the old-fashioned stockings held up by a garter belt, the fitted waist, a chest filled out with a push-up bra. He imagines this outfit and then tries to imagine Galen wearing it. The man is at *least* six-foot three, at *least* two hundred pounds, and from what he's seen, mostly muscle. "No way," he says. "You never."

Galen laughs. "Here," he says, and after a moment's search pulls another album from the shelf. This one is slimmer, with simple black covers. He flips through a few pages and shows it, without handing it over. "See?" And there he is, wearing a dress almost identical to the one Daniel imagined, hands on hips, smiling. He's younger and beardless, his lips painted a bright pink, with little pearl earrings and a pearl necklace. On him, the dress almost emphasises rather than diminishes his masculinity: his upper arms bulge out of short sleeves, and the dress draws tight across his chest. And yet, even though he looks like a man in a dress, he also looks happy, relaxed, face suffused with the pleasure, Daniel imagines, of manifesting a loved one's desires.

"She even had me in a maid's outfit once, you know, one of those French Maid ones? It was very silly." He closes the album, returns it. "A few times, she sent me to work in panties. Wanted me thinking of her all day. By the time I got home, I was ready to—" He coughs. "Anyway. It was fun. I'll admit I didn't exactly go into town dressed like that, but when someone came knocking at the door, I didn't hide in the closet, either." He grins. "The pizza guy thought it was hilarious."

He leans against the bookshelf with arms folded across his chest. "Anyway. If you find wearing her clothes embarrassing, then that's embarrassing for you. If you feel shame, then you feel shame. I won't contest that. But it's coming from you, not me. I don't care." He frowns. "No, that's not true. I do. If anything, it makes me happy. To know that under that hoodie, you're wearing her corset. To know, Daniel, that for maybe the last time, these clothes of hers, they're enjoying a second life. That I didn't preserve them for nothing. That something of the woman I loved carries on, and that she's here, right now, with me, in some little way.

“Does that make sense?”

Daniel gets it. This so-called holiday was meant as an escape—from work, his sister, Chloe—but ever since leaving Toronto, he hasn’t stopped thinking about all three. Especially Chloe. His heart aches, to think of her, and what they had, and how it’s all gone. How long, he wonders, before he stops thinking of her, and the pain stops?

And they’ve only been together for three years. Galen was married to this—girl, they were together for much longer. Not that time necessarily means anything. Moss growing over a stone says little about the nature of the stone itself. But still. Of course he misses her. He’s kept her room intact, her clothes tidied away, and meticulously organised photo albums lined up on a bookshelf. It’s easy for him to imagine the hollow ache the man carries around with him. Daniel feels it himself. People leave, and people die; and life continues.

He holds his hands flat against his abdomen, feels the way the corsetry beneath holds in his belly, pulls in his waist, very slightly, the constraint, the comfort of the thing. This was hers, he thinks. Crossing his legs, garters shift and he feels the gentle grip of the stockings at his thigh, the unfamiliar seam slip along his toes. Amber wore these.

“Yeah,” Daniel says, “I guess it does.”

“Good.” He sits, this time in the single chair opposite the sofa. He sits with his elbows on his knees, leaning forward, and his face is animated by eager intensity. “Because when I say you remind me of her, it’s meant as a compliment. I hope you can see that. It’s not just that you look like her a bit. You do, you know. You’re roughly the same size as she was. I mean, the fact her underwear fits is a good hint. And I bet you’d fit into one of her dresses, no problem, especially with that corset on.”

Daniel squirms, fights back a grimace. Galen notices and laughs. “But it’s not that, not just that. It’s more—well, we’ve only just met. So, I hope you don’t mind me saying. Though I’m usually a pretty good judge of character. See, you remind me of the Amber I first met, that is, the person she was before she chose that name. I hope you don’t mind me saying this. But like her, I get a sense that you’re angry. Maybe deeply unhappy. And maybe, not quite sure who you are, right now, or even who you want to be. Does that sound about right?”

And though he hates to admit any of this, it hits close to home, close enough that his stomach feels queasy. He *is* unhappy; and he doesn’t know what to do next. Biting his lip, he answers, in a quiet voice, “yes.”

The man nods with satisfaction. “I think you decided to come up here because you thought you needed an escape. You wanted to leave behind all those things you told me about last night. But what you wanted to leave behind the most was yourself. And maybe the real reason you came this way was to find a new you.”

Galen’s voice washes over him like the rising tide, deep and rolling, pulling him along with it. There’s something mesmerizing in the rich timbre, the methodical tempo of his speaking. The man leans a little closer. “Listen, I—” and he pauses, and there’s a little pink in his cheeks, too, a rueful little grin. “I don’t know what your plans are. I’m going to do as I said. I’ll get out there, hook your car up to the four-wheeler, get it out of that ditch. Almost guaranteed, the roads will get cleared tonight. Then if you want—” Galen trails off, shrugs those massive shoulders. “I spoke to John and Sarah this morning, they’ve still got the holiday cabin waiting for

you. And you really should check it out, it's a beautiful place. And maybe you go, and don't come back."

Now, he drums his fingers on his knees, and there's an almost bashful look to his face. "But if you like—I mean." Galen shakes his head, runs his fingers through his hair. "C'mon, buddy, help me out here."

Daniel takes a deep breath. This breath is partly arrested by the corset. This unexpected constriction makes him start, and he blushes. He crossed and uncrossed his legs and sees that Galen follows this motion with his eyes. The sudden restriction, or perhaps this man's unexpected openness—maybe something about the conversation—he doesn't quite know, but he's now terribly aroused, again, hard and straining against his panties. Blushing, he folds his hands over his lap. "Are you asking me to stay?"

Galen nods.

"Is it because I remind you of Amber?"

A long pause, in which a profound silence settled between them. The man studies him, and though it's a struggle, Daniel stares back, unflinchingly. Then, Galen answers: "yes."

He doesn't know what to say, or how to answer. In part, because he's distracted by the desperate urge to reach into his jeans and adjust himself, to do something about the confusing excitement he feels that only intensified with the man's admission.

"There are other reasons, too." After a long pause, Galen continues. "I said you remind me of Amber. And you do look like her, sometimes, it's true, and I'm sorry that makes you uncomfortable. But there's another way you remind me of her. Above all, Amber was—kind; it wasn't always obvious, but she was the most kind-hearted and caring soul I've ever met. And I sense that same kindness in you, Daniel. Maybe you've never thought of yourself as a very kind person. I don't know. Amber often didn't. She didn't believe me when I told her she was a good person. But she was. And so are you, I can tell. Maybe, like her, you find it difficult to believe good things about yourself. Maybe, like her, you've got bad memories, a traumatic childhood, holding you back. Like I said, I don't know. But I'd love to find out and I'd be—honoured—if you decided to stay a little longer.

"The truth is," Galen continues, and now his eyes drift away, and focus on the view outside, the blinding whiteness, and the starkness of an empty blue sky. "I'm also enjoying the company. Having someone to talk to. I told you yesterday this was my first Christmas alone. Remember that? And that I was looking forward to it. That was a lie. Daniel, I'm terrified of spending this holiday alone. I don't know what to do with myself. I'm scared. Lonely. This morning, I thought the best thing I could do would be to get you on your way. I was being weak, I told myself, and it wasn't fair to you, or to myself.

"But loneliness isn't a weakness. And then, this morning with you making breakfast. Those pancakes. Just—the sounds of life in the kitchen, again, in this cabin, instead of just me, rattling about, alone, listening to old records, reading while the wind whistles outside my window and the snow hardens and everything grows dark. I'm... not ready for that. Not yet, anyway. But still, I couldn't ask, because—why *should* you stay? You've got your holiday and your own problems to deal with.

“But then, when I found you on the floor, in pain. I realized that maybe, neither of us needs to be alone. You can wear Amber’s stuff, and that seems like a good thing. You could heal, and that’s good, too. And having some company—not being alone at Christmas—that seems the best of all. And I admit, it’s still not quite fair. I’m asking a lot of you, too much, maybe. Telling you that you remind me of Amber, how is that fair? Telling you that the thought of you wearing her clothes makes me happy, how is that fair? So I understand, I do. If you want to go. I don’t want you to feel trapped or anything.”

Galen turns back to him now, a slow smile spreading across his face, looking entirely too much like a reluctant schoolboy asked to deliver a speech in front of a class, only to discover he’s quite good at it, the words coming easier than expected. “Sheesh, look at the time,” he says, and sounds relieved. “All this talking, it’s getting late, and I really should get my ass in gear. So what I’m going to do now is, I’m going to go outside and get your car back in the driveway. And then I’ll come back in, and you can tell me your decision. I hope you’ll decide to stay. But I won’t pressure you, and you can take any of Amber’s clothes that you like, if you need them, if you decide to leave.”

Then, without another word and without waiting for an answer, Galen turns and walks away. He crosses over to the back door and takes his coat. He pulls on his boots and scarf and opens the door. Only then does he pause. For a moment, Daniel thinks the man is going to turn around and come back in. But he doesn’t. Cold air and a dusting of snow swirls at the entrance, and then he steps through, closes the door behind him.

When he returns an hour later, face red with cold, Daniel is in the kitchen, wearing the same apron as in the morning. He’s cleaned up from breakfast and put lunch on. He’s made a pair of hearty sandwiches, and a homemade soup simmers on the stovetop.

Daniel smiles. “I’d love to stay,” he says.

Chapter Five

~~Galen~~ ~~Husband~~

Love,

Yes. Remember this. When you think of me. If you can, without hate. That I love you.

I love you but I cannot be the woman you want me to be. For the longest time, I thought it was what I wanted as well, more than anything. Playing at being your wife was the happiest time of my life. But it was always just that: play. Play, as in something fun to do. But also play, as in a part, the role you gave me.

Whatever comes next, please please please remember that I loved you.

It's day one, and I haven't gotten very far at all, close enough that you could probably catch me, if you left right now. Part of me wishes you would. Come chasing after me. I didn't expect it to be this hard.

I write this from a tiny motel room. It's raining outside and everything is dark and cold. I've already tried sleeping but the little fridge keeps rattling to life and wakes me up. I tried unplugging it but then the frost in the freezer started to melt. Drip drip drip. There's a wet patch in the carpet at its base now. I lay there in bed for ages and then gave up. So instead, I'm writing this letter.

Let me tell you about this place. The motel is by the side of one of the roads into the city. I'm not going to tell you which city, but you know it, we've been here together. There's an open field opposite the motel, just trees and grass so now that night has fallen it's just a wall of dark out past the light of the single streetlamp. A few cars fly past every now. Their headlights flash through the curtains. There's no restaurant or anything, I'd have to walk about twenty minutes along the road in the dark to the nearest place.

I had a Snickers bar for dinner.

The room's too small for a desk, so I sit on my bed with my back to the headboard and my writing pad on my knees. I feel so lonely and a little afraid. But I also feel free. Maybe that's what freedom feels like, a little scary, a little lonely. I wouldn't know. It's been a very long time since I've been free. Free to be lonely and cold and hungry, but also free to go where I want and do what I like and be who I want to be. For the first time in years, tomorrow doesn't feel like a repetition of yesterday. This motel room is not a small cabin in the woods. The people I meet won't be you.

I miss you.

It's cold in this room and the heater doesn't work right and the sheets aren't heavy enough and I'm hungry and I'm sad and I'm scared and

Now I'm thinking about you and your big arms around me and how well I fit into you, safe and warm. And now I'm imagining you kissing the back of my neck. Your hands on my tits. Gently stroking as I wiggle back into you. I can feel you growing hard, your cock pushing into my bum. Now you hold me firmly. Your hand, grabbing and kneading. Forefinger and thumb squeeze down on a nipple. I gasp, lean back into your chest, neck extended, mouth open. You bend

down. Our open mouths meet. You pinch, hard. My nipple throbs with heat, you roll it between your fingers squeeze again, tug on it, let go. I gasp into your mouth, and giggle and feel the rumble deep in your chest. In a moment, you'll push me down into the mattress, face-first, pin me and enter me—

And I had to stop writing, then, because

Thinking of you, I spread my legs and I didn't feel cold anymore, alone in a motel room. I played with my tits the way you used to play with them, and touched myself below, and moaned and made little gasping noises, those sounds you love so much. And when I finished, I felt a little sad and the loneliness came crashing back and finally I slept, for a few hours, before the sun rose, the sky bright and blue, and I was off on my way once more.

I left you a pair of meat pies in the freezer, and a Tupperware full of soup. Chestnut, your favourite. There's another one full of pasta sauce. You wondered why I was so busy in the kitchen. Stocking up for the winter, I said. But that was a lie. I was getting ready to leave. Stocking up on goodwill maybe. I should've been packing my bag. Instead, I was packing your lunches. Dutiful little wife to the end. Just like you wanted me to be.

[Add anecdote about tourtière and how French Canadians ate every last bird. A bit like what Galen did to her, ate her up completely.]

No. That's not fair or at least it's not completely fair, there was a time there when I wanted it too. And I tried, Galen, I really did. To be that girl. Your girl. The pretty little housewife in the little house with the two of us the boundaries of our world, the sum total of our everything. The two of us, our love.

This was always enough for you. But then, this was the world you crafted. The property in the woods, the cabin, and me. You made it all. First, the piece of land. Then, the house. Finally, the perfect little woman to fill it with life.

Enter Kayden.

Remember him?

Enough of this. I had to step away from that last one. I don't even know why I'm writing this letter. Something to do I guess to kill the long hours on the bus. It would be smarter to just walk away without a word. But then, I've never been very smart. Kinder to never send this letter, too. But then, I've never been very kind, either.

Then again, who ever said I'm writing this letter to be kind?

Well, in that spirit, let's make something 100% clear. You will never see me again. I'm gone. The me you know as 'Amber' is dead and gone and never really existed anyway. She was a dream, a shared hallucination, a lie you made me believe.

And I know how fucking stubborn you can be. You won't or can't accept that I'm gone. Maybe you think it's one of our 'games'. This isn't a game. I'm not being a brat. I won't keep you waiting for a few days or a week or two and then come back so that you can sweep me up in your arms and carry me to the bed and fuck everything right again. I'm gone. I'm dead. Good bye, Galen. Don't

try to find me. You'd do better finding someone new to take my place. After all, the world is a very big place and I'm a very small and unimportant person and you'll never find me, even if you try for the rest of your life.

Oh, but where's the fun in that? Here's a hint. I'm writing this on a bus that's just left the Ontario Northland depot in North Bay. I keep switching between staring out the window and then writing. I tried reading for a bit, I've got the Kindle you gave me. It's loaded up with books, all the ones you picked for me, a bunch I chose for myself. But it turns out I'm not in the mood for reading. Mostly I'm staring out the window. And when I get bored of that, I do a bit of writing. Then, I close my eyes and sleep and dream of a future I can no longer see and get all very excited and wonder who I'll be, what I'll become. I feel like a butterfly in its chrysalis. Vulnerable, alone and impatient. Then I'll open my eyes and see how the landscape has barely changed, or we'll be stopped in some little town in the middle of nowhere, tiny restaurant, cramped bathroom.

So, where am I?

I could be headed south, to Toronto. I've always fancied myself a big city girl. But then maybe I went east, to Ottawa, maybe I'll hook up with some politician, I hear they're all perverts, just like you. But maybe, just maybe, I've gone north. Timmins. Cochrane. Polar Express, all the way to Moosonee, I'm a thousand kilometres away and surrounded by snow and ice, finding myself in wide expanses of tundra.

Or maybe this whole letter—all of it—from the very first line to the last one—maybe it's all lies. I haven't gone anywhere. Really, I'm just around the corner. Did I fool you? I really am a brat, aren't I? I was just hiding out because I'm too weak and afraid and I'm giving myself a way out, a way back, this really is all a game, ha ha, fooled you.

Actually, I'm on a Greyhound headed to the States.

Can you imagine?

I think we both know I wouldn't do that. They're fucking crazy down there.

Chapter Six

Daniel folds the letter back into its envelope. Judging by the crease lines, the letter has been opened, read and put away many times. But the other letters remain unopened. He slips the envelope in with the others and places them back in the cupboard, far towards the back behind the baking trays, the cupcake pan and cake tins. He quietly closes the door. Then, he steps over to the sink. He pours himself a glass of water. Drinks it standing up, then gives the glass a quick rinse and puts it to one side to dry.

The kitchen is dark. It's very late, just a little past two-thirty in the morning. He'd woken up in a cold sweat from dreams whose finer details he forgot almost immediately, though an impression of clawing hands, dragging him down, remained. His arms and legs trapped, thrashing about in long, trailing clothing that wrapped around his limbs and pulled him down into sucking mud, a swamp, a pond. Bright flowers and black waters. Millais' Ophelia—yes, something like that, with him as the tragic figure, what an odd thing to dream. And he'd been falling, falling into murky darkness, pond muck closing in over eyes and mouth, until he jerked awake, face buried in the pillow and legs trapped in the long, trailing hem of one of Amber's chemises. He still wore the corset and her panties, and the night shirt; combined, the pain in his head was kept at bay, though the discomfort of the clothes themselves proved a new barrier to deep sleep.

At first, he sat there in the silence of the room for a while, wide awake. A little light from the solitary streetlamp by the road out front of the cabin leaked in around the curtain. The heating kicked in for a minute, a quiet exhalation from the floor vent. Wind outside rose and fell. He checked his phone and saw the time. No new messages. Eventually, he stood, tugging the long chemise into place, smoothing the cool satin over his torso and legs. He went to the bathroom. Passing by the mirror, he stopped and examined his reflection. He did this every time, now, and marvelled at how quickly, how easily he'd grown accustomed to these clothes. There was no doubt that he still looked like a man in woman's clothing. But there was also a certain androgyny enforced by the narrowed waist, the delicate shoulder straps and the way the satin fabric flowed over his body. He held his hands at his hips and felt the corset beneath, then touched his forehead, quiescent pain, a dormant threat.

He sighed, went to the bathroom, sitting to take a piss, nightgown tucked between chin and collarbone. Returning to the bedroom, he found a pair of slide-on slippers tucked neatly beneath the edge of the bed. They were white and fuzzy with a bit of pink trim. Sliding them on, he discovered they had a bit of wedge heel, too. They clopped slightly with every step. He considered grabbing his phone but without pockets wasn't sure where to keep it. His normal pyjamas had pockets. Carrying it in his hand wasn't an option. He needed his hands free to lift the trailing hem of the nightdress.

The hallway outside the room was partly lit by moonlight from a window at the far end. There were pictures on the wall and standing on sideboards, though in the dim light he couldn't see them properly. Walking quietly, the chemise swished around his calves with a silky whisper. Pinching the garment at the waist, he held the hem high to avoid tripping as he descended the stairs. He was wide awake. He considered sitting by the bookshelf and reading for a bit. Or maybe skimming through one of the photo albums.

But once downstairs, he went straight to the kitchen and the cupboard and reached in to the back past the baking pans and trays and retrieved the stack of bound letters. He had the first letter out before properly knowing what he was doing.

Now, having read the letter, he scratches at his chin, moves over to the chair by the bookshelf and sits down. He's grown a bit of stubble. Last time he shaved was the morning he left Toronto. That was on Friday. It's now early Monday morning. Facial hair has always grown in slowly for him. He tried growing a beard a few years ago. Like so many other things, he failed at that, too. Chloe convinced him to give up. You look like a porn star, she said, grimacing at his thin moustache. And not in a good way. And she hated kissing him with stubble on his chin.

He grabs an album from the shelf. It's the one Galen showed him, the thin black one with him dressed as a housewife, a man in a dress who somehow seems all the more masculine despite the feminine clothing. It's a slim album, most pages holding a single photograph. These are large photos, some of them of professional quality. At a glance, many of them are boudoir shots, lots of lingerie and bared skin, and some appear to be outright explicit.

Daniel feels the back of his neck grow hot and feels thankful for the coolness of his nightwear. I should put this back, he thinks, then flips over to the first page.

The first photo is a little grainy, maybe a digital print blown up too large. In this one, Amber poses a little awkwardly, hands half-thrust into jeans pockets. They're girl jeans, ankle-length, slim legs and tight across the ass, but otherwise this is the most boy-like of any photo Daniel's seen. She's maybe seventeen, eighteen in the picture. No makeup—no, that's not right, Daniel notices there's a slight sheen to her lips, highlighted by the camera's flash—but also a hint of stubble across—his?—chin, and a baggy sleeveless t-shirt pushed out slightly by a padded bra, straps visible, one hanging loosely partway down her left bicep. The arms are skinny, though muscular, and the neck long, hair in a mid-length ponytail. She wears slip-on shoes with a low heel, and fishnet pantyhose, against a background suggesting some kind of basement, maybe, wood-panelled walls and brown carpeting, a low-slung table formed from two concrete cinder blocks and a slab of plywood. On it, what looks like an X-box, a couple bottles of Molson, a vape, a stick of incense. Light from the camera's flash flares in a framed picture on the wall.

Hello Kayden, Daniel thinks, the name from the letter. Kayden stands there chewing on—*his* lower lip, Daniel decides, this is a boy, clearly; and he guesses that Kayden is experimenting with crossdressing maybe, there's a look of such earnest desire for approval in his eyes. His smile is hesitant but happy, but unsure in its happiness, as if questioning whether this is allowed, and seeing this Daniel chews his lip, too for recognizing that look all too well, it's the same he sees reflected when he studies his own form in the mirror, and admires what he sees, the heady mix of pleasure and shame at acknowledging the prettiness of the clothes he's forced to wear.

Quickly, he flips the page, and his breath catches in his throat. Amber lies on her back, partly propped up by pillows behind her back. Her arms are held above her head. She lies on an unfamiliar bed, in a room Daniel doesn't recognize. Print of a painting on the wall over her head, something from the Group of Seven, an island rendered in vivid colours with thick, simple strokes, a tree bent by unseen winds. Both her wrists are tied by what appears to be strips of black silk to the bedposts. A black mesh body clings to her skinny frame, shoulders and arms bare. Beneath the mesh, her nipples protrude, areola puffy and large, and there's a hint of

breasts, the beginning of curves. Her lips are painted bright red, cheekbones glossy and highlighted, but there's still something masculine in the chin, her nose. An erection, clearly visible, strains against her panties.

Her—but surely his?—look is one of eager insolence, one part defiance balanced against pleading eyes, large, brown and desperate, heavy with eyeliner, thick mascara, dark eyeshadow. Amber or Kayden, Daniel wonders, the boy who came before or is this the emergence of the girl Galen loves? Can I do that, he wonders, think of her as him? Galen said that Amber was never a boy. The person in the picture wears lipstick and lingerie and has—breasts—very small, like a flat-chested girl, but these are definitely girl things and so she must be a girl. But she also has a penis, and girls can't have a penis, so this must be a boy, albeit one who enjoys presenting as a girl, or playing at it.

Play, as in something fun to do, that's what she wrote in the letter. But also play, the role you gave me. Was this role freely chosen, did she want him to tie her to the bed, take a picture, make her beg for—Daniel doesn't know, he's never done anything like this, not with Chloe, or any other partner. The person on that bed appears angry, desperate—and very aroused; and he is too, Daniel realised, shifting uncomfortably in his seat, hand drifting over his crotch. He stares long and hard at the photo and grows a little hot doing so, the corset once again feels tight, though not unpleasantly so, quite the opposite, there's something reassuring in its grip. Touching himself through the silk of the chemise, the satin of panties, he feels how hard he's become, cock straining against their constraints, much like the person in the photograph.

Did Galen force this role on—them?

Daniel turns the page, skims ahead. There are boudoir shots, professionally taken, Amber in lingerie, provocatively posed. A single photo under harsh lights, surgical gown, pale face, fear in their eyes; in the next, bruised face recovery, brave smile, sipping on a straw held between puffy lips. Her breasts are noticeably larger. Another set of boudoir photos, the lingerie skimpier, the girl in them bustier, curvier, braver in her exhibitionism.

Then, a pair of wedding photo set opposite each other. The first is simply a larger version of the one Galen showed him yesterday: Amber the blushing bride, plunging neckline, veil pushed back, hair sparkling with woven crystals. The downcast eyes, a bashful half-smile.

Opposite, Amber poses, cocked hip, lascivious grin, smouldering eyes, wedding dress pooled at her feet. Stiletto platform heels and crushing bridal corset, ivory and inlaid with a swirling pattern of shimmering thread. White stockings and garters, lace panties. Beautiful breasts, perfect really, pushed high. Pearlescent oval nails; one hand on her hip, the other beckoning towards the camera, a curled finger, this way, she signals, get over here, forever summoning her lover to her side.

At first, Daniel stares at the photo and tries to insert Chloe into it. The wedding dress, the shy smile. But he can't make Chloe fit that fantasy, because it's just that, a fantasy. They talked once about the possibility of marriage, about a year ago.

That's right, in the week leading up to Christmas. She'd been watching one of those ridiculous Netflix seasonal films she loves, with the ludicrous plots, this one something about a prince and a young female reporter falling in love. It ended with the prince proposing to the girl, on one knee, of course, with a ring, and despite the girl's protestations, she gave in—of course she did—the wedding itself saved for the sequel.

You ever think about that? he asked, after the movie was over. For us?

Chloe frowned. What?

Marriage, he said.

Chloe laughed, saw he was serious, and sighed. She made it clear she wasn't interested. She had no interest in giving up her name, of subsuming her identity into his. Living together is one thing, for life, even. But marriage is a mug's game, she said, dripping in patriarchal religiosity, it's a total con for women, an outdated tool of oppression. Legalized prostitution, a death-knell for female freedom. After all, what did women get out of the deal? The destruction of a promising career? I mean, just look at that movie, she said, stupid as it is. The girl's protests were all valid, and the man just ignores them: her father, her friends, her career—

Her career was a blog with thirty thousand hits, Daniel interjected. And he was a king. Of, like, an entire country. Romania, by the looks of it.

She rolled her eyes. The point is, it's just expected the girl gives up her freedom in exchange for a lifetime of unpaid labour, the expectations to keep the home, squeeze out a couple kids, surrender her life to his. No thank you, she said. Not interested. And when he pointed out that he did most of the housework, never mentioned kids, and was supportive of her career, she just shrugged and started scrolling for the next Christmas special. Then, scowling, she turned back to him: why do you even want to get married? Your own parents, for fuck's sake, isn't that reason enough *not* to—

He walked away, in part because he always walked away when she turned nasty, but also because he didn't have an answer, just a vague notion that marriage was the natural next step in a relationship, not so much a token of security as an indicator of success, whatever that might mean. All he knew was that for him, marriage was a symbol without a signifier; it meant something deep and profound but Daniel has no idea what that might be.

Now, a year later and for the first time, he wonders: what if he'd offered to flip it around? If he took her name, slid his identity into hers? And now when he looks at the pair of images, and especially the second, and tries to place Chloe in it, she slips away like a dream on waking, and instead pictures himself, in the ivory corset—which is easy to do, he's already wearing one, though its nowhere nearly as dramatic as Amber's bridal lingerie—but also, the dress.

How does it feel to wear something like that—to sit at the centre of ceremony—the focus of attention—after all, the groom stands to one side but it's the bride that walks the aisle, and all eyes are on her, not him—in her sparkling white gown, so beautiful—but forbidden, of course, to men, this most feminine of items, a gendered relic of social expectations, a day's fantasy in exchange for the loss of a name, subservience and silence. After all, it's the groom that gives a speech, the best man, the fathers—not the bridesmaid, certainly not the bride, or her mother—women sit in silence as the men joke about the inadequacies of the newly-minted husband, the kind of humour that only comes from the comfort of superiority.

Of course it's not like that anymore. Over the past few years, Daniel's been to a few weddings—most of them with Chloe—and at least half the brides had their say. At one of them, Sylvia and Philip's wedding, she was a friend from all the way back to primary school, the husband took his wife's name. There was a lot of whispered exchanges about that over flutes of champagne, a ceremony paid entirely by *her* family, how money trumps tradition in the modern

economy, and what kind of man is he, anyway, earning less than her, family poor, taking her name. Daniel kept out of those conversations. Chloe was over at the open bar getting trashed, and he sat at the table and noted how *happy* the married couple seemed, especially Philip, all night he had the look of someone who'd won the lottery. To judge by the Christmas card sent out early December, they were still married, happily so.

Daniel closes the album. He sits there with it resting on his lap, beneath his hands, folded into each other. In the silence of the night, he looks outside and sees the moonlight glimmer on snow, and beyond the glow of the solitary streetlamp, the unfathomable darkness of the wilderness. Thousands of miles of forests and lakes and hills, the northern reaches of the Canadian shield, great slabs of pre-Cambrian rock, mountains, glaciers and oceans, a vast expanse invisible under its shroud of darkness in which he is an insignificant speck, a mote of dust, meaningless.

He returns the album to the bookshelf. Kayden—or Amber—crafted their own meaning, out of their own body, first through their gender and then, it seems, through their relationship with Galen. Then they rejected that meaning, left and maybe they're still out there, somewhere. But for a while *she* seemed happy, the bride, the housewife, content in subsuming her dream into his. Then something changed.

Daniel wanders back over to the sink for another glass of water. How is such a transformation even possible? To exert such ownership over one's own body—to literally transform it into something else—not just fashion or the temporarily induced curves of corsetry—and not just as play, crossdressing and mimicry, taking on a mantle of femininity to pretend at softness and—fake tits, long hair, painted nails—whatever the simulation requires. But this is far more, an act of inconceivable conceit, making the mock-up permanent through—surgery, presumably and—whatever else it takes, hormones of some sort, probably, oestrogen—and—he doesn't know, but it must be more than that, he thinks.

To be born a man and to become a woman.

He stands at the sink, hands flat to the counter, pressing down, hard.

Why would any man do that?

His whole life, Daniel's been aware that he enjoys a certain privilege, unearned and based purely in being born both white and male. Popular media has always been very keen to remind him of this innate advantage. His sister, too, and Chloe, often. And for most of his life he's felt a constant sense that perhaps he hasn't *earned* this privilege, that having been gifted it, it needs to be defended, reinforced through certain rituals, only dimly understood but which seems to involve, in various degrees, sport, or trucks, video games, beer and barbecues, a certain way of looking at and speaking to women, online and in real life.

And with this privilege comes a certain ease, he supposes, though his life has never felt easy, especially recently but even as a kid. How much harder might it have been as a girl, though? Dealing with—periods, say? Or expectations to help out around the house, in the kitchen, laundry, that kind of thing. Tara certainly always resented it, when Dad asked her to help.

Chloe complained about it, each and every time they visited her parents, it's not fucking fair, she'd say, after dinner I'm in the kitchen cleaning up with Mom as she complains about her sciatica and you and Dad lounge around on the fucking couch, belching and farting and drinking

beer, why don't you get off your goddamn ass and help? Even as her mom insists he sits and relax, you poor dear, you work so hard; and Harold asks him to watch the game, Leafs got it this year, you wait and see, and Daniel never quite knows what to say, he couldn't give a shit about hockey.

And his workplace is pretty egalitarian, but there's still an expectation, one that seems to fall harder on the women, in terms of how they dress and present. He's listened to the podcasts, read a few books, knows that women are far more likely to get interrupted in conversation, talked over or ignored, especially by men, and especially at work. Expectations of unpaid labour, it's always the junior girls in the office who organize the little events, birthday parties, farewells, wash up the coffee cups, put away the cutlery. Sure, there's a certain social joy in all that, maybe. Pleasure derived from shared misery. Feminine community, and the ladies at work are always kicking off early on Friday, happy hour at Abrielle's downtown, there's even a book club to which he's never been invited to join, girls only.

Still. It seems a poor payoff against the cost in time and money of makeup, shoes, hair, the constant rotations of fashion, nails, pantyhose, sitting to take a piss and everything else Daniel imagines goes into making a woman, God, it's exhausting just thinking about it and it brings him back to his original question: why would anyone born male voluntarily choose to give up the innate privileges of his birth?

He touches his forehead, the dressing over his injury. There's a momentary twinge there, and Daniel draws in a hissing breath in anticipation of something worse. Then it subsides. He releases his held breath. Outside, it begins to snow again, very lightly. It's getting very late. I should get back to bed, he thinks. By the glow of the clock over the stove, it's now three-thirty-two. Yet instead of going back upstairs, he wanders over to the window. The scene outside is beautiful, serene in the silence of the falling snow. So different, he thinks, from back home. It snows in Toronto, but rarely like this. And it's never quiet. There's the sound of traffic, always, the near or distant hum of the 400 and the 407, late night commuters, rattle of the train yard, bars and restaurants, cafes. Light pollution, the stars so dim but he just knows that if he went outside, right now, he could look up into the darkness of a mostly clear sky and even among the fluttering flakes make out the Big Dipper, Orion's Belt, the scintillating spread of the Milky Way across the endless expanse of the northern night sky.

He feels small, then, but not unpleasantly so, hugs himself and feels the silk chemise, the corset beneath, holds his hands flat against his smooth front. Then, his hands drift lower. Despite the serenity and his idle thoughts, he's still rock hard, erection tenting the nightdress. Very gently, he rubs himself through the cool layers of fabric. He sighs, tells himself he should stop, slowly circles his flat palm over the protrusion. He bites his lip. He's about to make an undignified mess in his host's living room, in his ex-wife's panties. Stop, or at least finish upstairs, he thinks, but continues rubbing, a desperate ache inevitably growing, and feels weak in the knees. He wants to sit down. He wants to flip open the photo album to—a page flare in his mind with absolute clarity—and reach under this silky nightdress and tug down those panties and—

He groans.

A moment later, there is an echoing groan from upstairs.

Daniel freezes, feeling like a teenage boy caught with a sock in his hand and porn on the computer. He listens. Again, the profound silence of late night. He releases a breath he hadn't

realised he'd kept in. Then, again, a low, long groan from upstairs, the sound of a bear waking from hibernation. A second later, there is a dull thud. Then, once again, silence.

Heart pounding in his chest, he's halfway up the stairs before he realizes it. Again, a groan—more of a shout—and it's clear now it's coming from the room next to Amber's room: Galen's. Daniel stands outside the door, hands twisting in his chemise. He hasn't seen his host's room. There hasn't been any reason to go in there. It's not that Galen's forbidden it or anything, but he's kept the door closed and it seemed rude to go poking around. Now, however, the door is ajar.

Daniel prods it open. The wooden door swings open quietly. This room faces the back of the house and without either streetlamp or moonlight is cast in deeper darkness, other than the pale blue rectangle of light from a plugin near the floor. The room is much smaller than Amber's. In one corner there is a double bed with a heavy wooden frame, and sitting up in bed is Galen.

The sheets are thrown aside and his bare chest heaves with ragged breathing. In the thin light from the hallway, his skin shines with sweat, muscles drawn and tensed. His mouth contorts without words, and his eyes are wide and staring. Tears streak his cheeks. Giving no indication of seeing Daniel, he grasps at something invisible, fingers curling like claws. Not finding it, he releases another deep, shuddering groan before falls back into the bed, clutching at his face.

Daniel sees Galen claw at his face, scratching, tearing at his beard. Fearing the man will cause some terrible injury to himself, he rushes to his side. He grabs for the man's arms. Shh, he says, it'll be okay, or something like that, it's okay, you're not alone, he has no idea what he's saying only that the sounds are meant as soothing. He finds the man's wrists, tries to restrain him. He might as well be trying to hold back an avalanche. Galen throws him off effortlessly, then shoots upright one more.

The bedsheets slide to the floor. Galen sleeps completely naked. There are old scars across his abdomen and thigh, pale lines and mottled flesh, perceived in a flash. Daniel also notes the man is very well endowed, his cock half in shadows and half-erect. The man twists, throwing his feet over the side of the bed, and then suddenly grabs hold of Daniel. He draws the other man into a tight embrace and holds him, tight.

Daniel's arms are pinned at his side. The chemise is a thin, silky barrier, smooth and slippery, between him and the naked man. He feels, for the first time, another man's penis, pressing into his thigh. A light scattering of chest hair tickles his face. With his face forced into the man's chest he is suddenly acutely aware of Galen's scent. And the man seems aware of *his* scent, suddenly burying his face in his hair, breathing deeply and—sighing, relaxing, ragged breathing easing and his grip relaxing, but still holding the smaller man in the circle of his arms.

You came back, Galen murmurs, and nuzzles Daniel's neck.

Unsure what to do, Daniel answers: yes. With his arms still trapped at his side, he feels something shift and grow under his palm. As if driven by some instinct, he feels for the intruding thing. It's Galen's penis, prodding him, reacting, he imagines, to the girl-smell that maybe clings to him, the tactile girl-feel of the nightdress, eager, for all he knows, after a long absence. In the dark of the room, Galen's penis feels large and erect, certainly the largest he's ever touched before. And it's hot, twitching slightly under his touch.

Unbidden, Daniel thinks of the octopus. They're fascinating creatures, the octopus. Just last month, he listened to an audiobook about them, how their evolution ran parallel to human's, the rise of a complex brain and intelligence along a totally different evolutionary track, separating from what would become the mammalian line—the vertebrate line—long, long ago. So different, they might as well be alien, not from this planet. Blue blooded invertebrate with an oesophagus running between both hemispheres of their brain, lobotomizing itself on sharp foods. A brain capable of expressing likes and frustrations, consummate tricksters, escape artists, problem-solvers: yet short-lived, all the evolutionary effort for a single, fleeting year of life, and what's the point of that? Amazing mimics, peerless reproduction of colours and textures, yet totally colour blind, unable to appreciate the vibrancy of their own flesh. And maybe most remarkable of all: eight arms operating autonomously, motivated by their own intelligence but only reporting back what they discover, working in cooperation not coercion with the octopus.

This made no sense to Daniel previously. Now, he thinks it does, for how else to explain the movements of his hand? Don't do this, he thinks. This is wrong. But his hand operates by its own instinct, fingers curling and flexing like tendrils beyond his control. He might flinch at the distant sensation of the thing beneath his palm, yet his fingers—coiling tightly—seize and press it down into his thigh, pinning its heat against the silk of the chemise.

Galen groans again. This sound is entirely different to before, thrumming with desire. Yes, he sighs, breathes in and then exhales, please. His arms loosen their grip on Daniel.

Only distantly aware of his own movement, Daniel rubs a little circle with his palm, flat against the man's penis, and rolls it against the silk chemise. Galen hisses. His eyes flutter, open, drift shut. His arms relax further. Daniel continues. He tries not to think about what's happening, of what his hand is doing. He's touching another man's cock. He's masturbating another man. Or rather, his hand is whilst he retreats, observes from a safe distance.

Slowly, Galen's arms fall away, drift limply to lie at his side. Daniel gathers the loose fabric of the nightdress and wraps it around the man's penis. In the dim light, the man's cockhead gleams with a sheen of precum. He looks away, his hold tightens, the penis fills his grip. Now, his hand slides up. The penis feels hot despite the coolness of the silk. It becomes increasingly difficult to maintain an objective distance from the act in which he's taking part. His hand slides to the base of the man's cock, he feels the tickle of coarse hair. He can't help but look. The man's scars stand out like a pale firework across his left hip, thigh, lower abdomen. God, he really is ripped, Daniel thinks. He's the kind of man he's always wanted to be. Tall and strong, confident. And his cock is easily the largest he's ever seen outside of porn, over a hefty pair of balls, wrinkled beneath a covering fuzz of tight, curly hairs.

In contrast, green silk and slender fingers, his fingers, and he feels the man's hardness, the texture and heat, watching his hand move up again, and down, slowly pumping and if anything, the man grows even harder and Daniel watches abs and legs pull taut, ass clenching tight. A shudder passes through his body: Oh God, Galen sighs, voice thick with sleep.

Daniel slowly sinks to sit at the side of the bed. He can't do this, he thinks. This is—he scrambles for a different word and gives up—gay, he's jerking off another man, and he's not gay but there's no getting around the fact that what he's doing feels very gay. His hand slows, stops. He should get up and leave. He hears another groan: please; large fingers fumble at his wrist.

Impossible to disassociate from what he's doing. Yet, in the dim light of the room, those slender fingers, the pale hand, it suddenly seems possible to imagine a girl's hand. The green fabric, its silky smoothness, that too belong to a girl. And if he's excited by all this—his own cock swollen in a satin embrace—well, of course he is, watching some pretty girl pleasure her man, there's nothing gay about that, it's a pornographic mainstay, healthy, really, manly even to enjoy the performance as she resumes, pumping faster now with what appears renewed vigour, and eager effort.

It doesn't take long. Only a few minutes, though it feels much longer, and with each stroke a dull roar rises in his Daniel's ears, his neck grows hot and he breaks out into a cold sweat. Just look at those muscles, for fuck's sake. And in comparison, here I am—in silky, clingy clothing—women's clothing—bare arms pale and slender in the dim light—*his* fingers—delicate digits, long and thin, an artist's fingers, or a musician's—wrapped around a man's penis—not some girl—sliding, up and down, mild cramp building at the base of his thumb—and the man's breath coming in hissed gasps, now—almost there—a low moan—and Daniel moans, too—because he's terribly aroused, too, he can't deny it, his fantasy of distancing himself from the act collapses in on itself and something about this whole situation has him so fucking excited, so goddamn hard in his cute panties, the return of what he felt downstairs, looking through the album, Amber in lingerie, imagining himself in the same, God, so hot and what the fuck?

A jerk of the hips; one hand curls into the bedsheet, the other at his wrist grips him painfully. With a strangled grunt, Galen comes. Daniel squeezes his thighs together and wishes he could, too. The man's cock jerks once, twice. His come feels hot beneath his palm, through the silk. The nightdress catches most of it, though not all. Then Galen sighs, sinks deeper back into the bed. His grip slackens, releases Daniel. Almost instantly, the man's breathing deepens. Within a minute, he's gently snoring. And Daniel is left looking at his right hand, a shining crescent of pearly white rimming the skin between forefinger and thumb. There's a wet patch in the nightdress, and at the sensation of its clammy stickiness against his bare thigh, panic rises in his chest.

Daniel takes a deep breath.

How often did *she* do this for Galen, he wonders.

He fights down a whimper, a scream.

After some time, Daniel stands and returns to his bedroom. He holds the nightdress and its wet patch away from his skin as he walks. I just jerked off another man, he thinks. Passing through to the bathroom, he avoids looking in the mirror. This is a man's semen on my hand. He runs hot water and grabs a great wad of toilet paper and first washes his hand and then scrubs at the patch. I held his penis and made him come. Meanwhile, his own arousal has abated, and his cock lies curled and torpid. He squirts hand soap into his hand and rubs it into the nightdress and scrubs some more and then, with a frustrated cry, grabs the whole thing and yanks it over his head and throws it in the corner.

There's a powerful warning throb from his forehead. Daniel grips the sink. No, he hisses. I'm not—but he doesn't know how to finish this thought, he doesn't know what he isn't, right now, but he's still wearing panties, and the corset, that has to be enough to keep the pain away, for fuck's sake? For a moment he's not sure, his eyes water and he grits his teeth, but soon the heat at his brow gives a final flare and fades. He's left shaking and weak, with only a minor headache.

Stumbling back into the bedroom, he digs into Amber's drawer and yanks over his head the first nightdress he finds and crawls back into bed. For a time, he lies there in bed under the sheets, holding up his hand, staring at it. He can still feel it, Galen's semen, as if the heat of it permeated the skin. His mouth is dry and he licks his lips.

I've got to get out of this place, he thinks.

Eventually, he lets his hand drop. His mind continues to swirl with incoherent thoughts. He thinks of Galen and of Chloe; he wonders how his sister is doing. Then he thinks of his dad and a great sadness wells up inside. He bites his lip. No, not that. And then, unexpectedly, he thinks of his mom. Why, he wonders, and finally, his mind turns to Amber and again he asks, why?

Finally, sleep grips him and pulls him downwards. He closes his eyes. Yet even then, he can still see him: the pale pattern of scars, his erect cock, a swath of green, purpled head, pearlescent sheen, the man's lips parted in a pleased smile, brown eyes, glinting.

Chapter Seven

“Knock, knock, buddy.”

Daniel is already awake. He’s been awake for some time, staring at the ceiling. In the early hours of the morning he maintained the belief that nothing happened last night, that it was all some weird dream. Then he went to the toilet, found the silk chemise with its crusty stain. He buried it in the back of the closet alongside yesterday’s panties, also stained. He dozed fitfully after that.

“Yeah, yeah. Come in.”

Galen opens the door, standing at the threshold.

“You always call out the things you do?” Daniel flutters his hand. “Wave, wave.”

The man grins. “You sleep okay last night?”

Daniel scratches his armpit, yawns. He’s wearing a long cotton nightshirt with 100% Princess printed across the front over a print of She-Ra, the modern one, flowing golden hair and sword held high. “Not bad,” he says, taps his forehead. “Maybe this is getting better.”

The man nods, hesitates in the doorway. At some point in the night, or the morning, he must have thrown on a pair of pyjamas, simple cotton top in black, plaid bottoms. Daniel feels a twinge of jealousy, wishes he could be free of the silk and satin, trailing hems and restrictive straps. “Listen,” he begins, then trails off. “Did something—” Galen scratches at his beard. “Did anything happen last night?”

A shiver runs down Daniel’s spine. “How do you mean?”

Uncharacteristically, Galen flinches away. Looking a little sheepish, he says, “Did I—make any noises last night?”

Daniel releases his breath. “Yeah. I heard you.”

A sigh, and Galen crosses into the room. He sits heavily at the foot of the bed. “I’m sorry. I have nightmares.” He taps his head, over his temple. “I’m a bit fucked up, you might say. It doesn’t happen often. But often enough. It’s why we had separate bedrooms,” he adds, sweeping his arm out to indicate Amber’s room, and his own. “When these nightmares hit, I can—thrash around, get—violent, I guess.” He grimaces. “Once, I woke up to find myself straddling Amber, I had my hands around her neck, strangling her. Another time, I hit her, in my sleep, just lashed out and clipped the side of her face, gave her a black eye. I—” His hands clench and unclench in his lap, and he still doesn’t look at Daniel. “I’m sorry. If anything happened last night, if I scared you.”

“It’s fine.” Daniel hesitates, too. By the pale light of morning, last night’s events have taken on a veneer of unreality, like a memory of a photograph rather than the memory itself. It doesn’t seem possible that only hours ago, in the dark, he sat next to this man on his bed and—

“I was up, couldn’t sleep and when I heard—uh, the noises you made, I checked in on you.” Galen turns those placid brown eyes on him, curious, anxious. Under his gaze, he blushes. His hand feels hot, and his thumb twitches as if in anticipation of another cramp. “You don’t remember?”

Galen shakes his head.

"I came into your room, I probably shouldn't have, I'm sorry. But I asked if you were okay. I don't think you heard me, but then you grabbed me—like this." He mimics a hug, the way Galen gathered him in his arms. Galen eyes widen, and Daniel's blush intensifies. "I think—maybe—you thought I was Amber? I was wearing her clothes, maybe I smelled like her. Anyway, you—just sort of held on to me for a bit, and then—" I jerked you off—"you went quiet, let go and fell back to sleep."

There's doubt in the man's eyes, but he seems to accept the story. Nodding, the anxiety fades from his eyes, and then he smiles broadly. "I'm sorry. That must have been uncomfortable for you. See? I said you were a kind person. Checking in on me was a very kind thing to do."

"Stop saying that." Now Daniel's cheeks are bright red. "It makes me uncomfortable."

Galen laughs. "It's a compliment." He stands, walks back over to the door. "Anyway, in case you lost track, it's Monday today, the twenty-second. The roads are clear, the plough passed through in the night. Which turns out to be a mixed blessing. Means I can head into town. I thought I was clear until the new year, but it looks like I've got to head in and take care of a few things. Work." He shakes his head in mock despair. "Typical."

Still lying in bed, Daniel feels a flush of shame, or at least awkward embarrassment. He has no work to do, no reason to get out of bed, really. "Army?"

Galen snorts. "No, I quit that years ago. I'm a landlord, now. One of the good ones, I hope. Have a few properties in town. Anyway, what with the snow and the storm, I've had calls. There're a couple repair jobs that need doing. So, I'm going to grab a shower, get dressed and head in. You've got the house to yourself. I hope you're okay with that? Although if you need any help with—" he waves his hand to take in the closet, the wardrobe—"any of Amber's stuff, the corset or whatever, let me know before I head off."

"Sure." Daniel holds his hands flat against his flanks, over the corset, and thinks how much he'd like to get out of it, today, he's had it on for a full day now and its pinching something awful, no wonder he couldn't sleep last night. He imagines the man's large fingers, tugging, the sibilant whisper of strings through eyelets and the gradual tightening of the garment, and the inducing of a shape from which there's no escape for the duration of a day. The brush of fingertips at his waist. A tickle at the base of his neck. He blushes, squirms a little in the bed.

"You think I should take it off?"

"Your call, buddy." Beneath his beard, a hint of a smile tugs at his lips. "Although, you seemed pretty okay with it yesterday." He shrugs. "After you got it on. As if the pain didn't bother you anymore."

"It's just—sort of uncomfortable, you know? Wearing it for so long."

"Amber used to say the same thing," Galen answers, shaking his head. "But she couldn't help herself. She loved it. Wore it almost every day, those first months she had it, and often enough after that. Until she outgrew it, I guess." He smiles wistfully. "She said it made her feel—more herself."

Daniel nods, as if he understands, and wonders how closely his figure cleaves to hers. They both wore this thing shaping his body. It shaped hers, too, for a time. With his hands resting

on his flanks, he can imagine the contours of her body, the corset a physical memory of this absent girl, connecting them through a passage of years.

“And, uh—” Galen trails off, and suddenly looks bashful, sounds nervous, again avoiding eye contact. He directs his voice towards the hallway. “If I get back, and you’re not here. Well. I’ll understand. Honestly.”

A few minutes after he leaves, Daniel grudgingly gets out of bed. He hears the water heater kick in, the gurgle of water through pipes. With his host in the shower, Daniel trundles downstairs. He doesn’t have a job to go to but that didn’t mean he can’t make himself useful. He heads into the pantry and grabs the apron from behind the door.

By the time Galen came downstairs, wearing sturdy jeans and a button-down plaid shirt, breakfast is waiting. The man’s eyes widen with happy surprise. “What’s this?”

“Least I can do.” Daniel gestures with a wooden spoon at the stove top. “Porridge.” Then the table. “Grapefruit.” Finally, a chair. “Sit.”

Bemused, Galen sits, cuts into the grapefruit with the serrated edge of a waiting spoon. The grapefruit is still hot from the oven, steaming slightly, sprinkled with cinnamon with a light crust of brown sugar. Daniel bustles about, brings him a bowl of porridge, a cup of freshly brewed coffee.

“You don’t have to do all this.” He speaks around a mouthful of grapefruit, juice wetting his beard. “It’s good, but you don’t—”

“I know,” Daniel interrupts. “But I’ve got to earn my keep, somehow.”

Galen doesn’t say anything. He reaches for the porridge. Daniel watches him expectantly. He takes a mouthful, frowns, tries another. “This is—”

“Different?” Daniel brings him a small saucer of thick cream. “I swear, nobody makes it right. They always rush it, make a soup out of it.” He shakes his head in disgust that’s only half mocking. He points the wooden spoon back at the pan on the stove. “This is how you do it right. Scottish style. Just water and oats, simmered slowly. Stirred with a spurtle.” He taps the spoon. “Which, I might add, you didn’t have so I had to make do.”

“Spurtle?”

“Scottish wooden stirring tool for porridge.”

“You mean a stick?”

Daniel waves the spoon at him. “Watch it, mister. That’s tradition you’re mocking.”

He lifts a spoon up to eye-level. “Just water?”

“And salt. But if you’re not a purist, I recommend a bit of that cream, there, or butter, and a sprinkle of brown sugar.” He indicates each item, wielding the wooden spoon with the authority of a teacher at the front of a classroom. “Try it.”

Looking more than a little sceptical, he tries a bite. Grimaces, pours in some cream, adds a pat of butter. Mollified by the second spoonful, he adds sugar and smiles at the third taste. “It’s good!”

“Isn’t it, though? Take a bit longer, but totally worth it. Your pantry’s well-stocked, I wasn’t expecting to find proper oats back there.”

“Amber took care of the shopping,” Galen explains. “Used to drive into town twice a week. I used to joke she was bunkering down for the apocalypse.” He nods towards the window, and the white expanse outside. “Which, to be fair, happens almost every year, up this way. Anyway. You joining me for breakfast?”

But Daniel shakes his head. He nibbled as he cooked, and his stomach’s tied in a knot, he’s not hungry at all. It might also be the corset, looser than before bed but still a constant compression against his abdomen. “Actually, I was going to grab a shower before you left. Would you mind—you know?” He blushes, tapping at the row of tucked laces down his back.

Galen nods, stands and approaches him. Daniel takes the She-Ra nightshirt off and faces away from the man. There’s a rumble deep in the chest of the man. Then, his scent follows: mostly just plain white bar soap, and a hint of deodorant, something woody; but underlying it all is something else he can’t pin down except to think of it as masculine, an echo of last night’s scent, experienced within the man’s embrace, nose pressed to his chest, curls of chest hair pricking his cheek. Finally, both hands at his waist, confident, shifting him slightly into position so that Galen can get at the laces. A minute’s fumbling. Daniel bites his lower lip, body jerking slightly with each tug of the laces. Then, the loosening, as the corset gives, and he takes a deep breath, releases it as a sigh, mixed feeling, both relief but slight disappointment as the pressure is removed, an unexpected comfort he’d taken for granted. With its loosening, heat grows across his forehead, and he winces, eyes watering slightly.

“There.” Galen steps away. Daniel pins the corset against his body with one arm, awkwardly collecting the nightshirt with his other hand. He smiles gratefully, gasps when sharp pain lances his temple.

“Hurting already, huh?” Galen shakes his head. “Never seen anything like it.”

Nodding, Daniel scurries away. “I better get in the shower.”

Upstairs, he tries the same trick as yesterday: a quick swipe of lipstick before jumping in the shower. It works, but only just. He stands with his face raised for a few long minutes, simply letting the hot fall of water hit his chest, his back, making the water hotter, the room blurring with steam, even as his head throbs and pain shudders down his spine. Eventually, he reaches for the soap, squirts a little into the palm of his hand. It smells of lavender. As the scent fills the shower, the tightness across his brow eases a little. Well, that’s something, he thinks. But as he begins to lather, starting with his legs, working up from the ankle, he shudders at the tactility of leg hair beneath his touch, not with disgust or surprise but with a queasy twist of the stomach, as if a connection is made between the hurt in his head and some space deep in his bowels via the catalyst of body hair.

At first, he stands there, breathing heavily. His fists curl with frustration, he hits the curtain, a ridiculous, petulant gesture. You’ve got to be fucking kidding me, he thinks. This is ridiculous. It’s not fair. Why is this even happening? But the thoughts flit across his mind almost by rote, and it’s with a fatalistic sigh that he reaches for the flat-handled razor. It’s pink and sits on a little glass shelf, along with an array of other feminine products: shampoo and body wash, of course, but also conditioner, shaving cream, moisturiser. He steps back from the direct spray of the shower and sits on the edge of the tub. Dispenses a curl of pink-tinted shaving cream and

spreads it over his legs. Of course, he's seen Chloe do this before, quick swipes every other day in the shower before work. But then, she's never had hair quite as thick as his. It's not that he's a particularly hairy man; he's not. Precisely four hairs on his chest, but there's enough across his legs that it looks gross, dark brown dots poking through swaths of white foam.

It takes longer than expected. Mindful of waste, he turns off the water. The razor clears an inch before the blades clog. Rinse, repeat, short swipes growing longer. Another application of cream, and with increasing confidence, long strokes sliding over his calf, the skin revealed beneath pale and smooth. Its awkward reaching the nooks and crannies behind the knee. There's a sharp sting where he cuts himself, a little blood swirling in the bath, pink froth, soon gone. He's not sure how high to go—stop above the knee? At his thigh? The razor glides easily up his hips, and he even cleans up the little trail leading to his bellybutton. Eventually he twists the water back on, rinses, and realizes that the pain's gone once more, his head clear, the line drawn taut between both temples slackening, releasing, gone.

After the shower, guided by memories of Chloe's routine, he finds a white tub of baby powder. He dusts his skin down, rubs moisturiser into his denuded legs, checks them in the mirror, the way they gleam in the light, the long, smooth lines of his calves. A grin sneaks its way to his face; he tries to force it down but it's irrepressible. There's no denying it: his legs look good. He's got great legs, and he can't help but think they'd look even better in stockings, he can even picture the pair he'd wear, waiting tucked away in the top drawer of the dresser in Amber's room. Now he's smiling, as he pads back into the bedroom, towelling himself dry. The pain hasn't just faded; it's been supplanted by a giddy pleasure humming just beneath the surface.

The corset waits on the bed. Daniel sits next to it, fingertips tracing out its stays. Does he really want to strap himself into this thing for the day? It'll guarantee the pain keeps away, maybe even induce the mild euphoria he felt before. But once he's strapped into this thing, it's on for the day. Once Galen's tied and tucked those cords, the corset's not coming off. It's a stupid idea. A few days ago, he'd never even considered wearing anything like it. It's this bump to the head, messing with his brain—with something far deeper. Now, he shivers. No. Better to keep it simple today, comfortable. Yet his hand remains where it was, passing over grommets, busk and boning. Next thing he knows, he's at the door, calling out to Galen: "Hey?"

The man's deep voice responds from downstairs. "Yeah, buddy?"

"I'm going to need a little help up here."

There's a dark rectangle of gravel out front left by Galen's truck. Two troughs carve through a foot of snow and join the road. Daniel's beat-up Honda sits parallel to the empty space. The door is dented, the side-view mirror busted, but otherwise the car looks fine, as good as can be expected considering it was his dad's car, and now it's his. Daniel stands at the window for some time, looking out. A terrible, gnawing anxiety slowly rises inside of him. There are multiple sources to this anxiety that he is aware of.

First, and least significant, he thinks, is the simple fact that he's alone, in some stranger's house, in the middle of nowhere. It feels strange to think of Galen as a stranger at this point. He's known the guy for all of a weekend. But can anyone who's quite literally saved your life really be considered a stranger? How about someone who laced you into their ex-wife's

corset? Shared intimate boudoir photographs of their life? Someone you gifted with a late-night hand job?

Heat rise in his cheeks. Yeah, there's another source of anxiety. Daniel's not gay or even bi; at least, he's pretty sure he's not. Thinking back, he can't recall ever being attracted to another man. In high school, at university, or increasingly infrequent visits to the gym or swimming pool, he'd always taken great care to show just the right level of disinterest in the other boys or men in the changing room. You couldn't stare, of course. But completely ignoring other people was weird, too, flinching away from male nakedness, avoiding eye contact. He wasn't ever quite sure he'd struck the right balance in the past. But then, nobody ever called him out on it, either. Easier when you were a kid. Boys waved their willies around like wands and challenged each other to see who could piss further. But very early, you learned to not look. Even earlier, not to touch.

As for showing – well, fine if your girlfriend sees it, obviously. Or a doctor. It's not that there's anything dangerous in glimpsing another man's cock, even if just for comparison's sake. But he's not one of those perverts who sends dick pics to random girls. Not like Brad, at work, always joke-bragging about the size of his cock, the pics he's sent, you'd think half the greater Toronto area's seen it. Annoyingly, he's only half-bragging, too. Daniel's seen it, in the changing room at work. Brad's cock *is* large, not porn-sized, but still. Large or not, there's no need to send unsolicited pictures of it to people. The man's a walking H.R. nightmare. One with a big cock. Big, but smaller than Galen's, smaller than the cock he held in his own hand just the night before, hard, hot and heavy through a flimsy layer of silk.

Christ, he's been daydreaming about cocks for five minutes now. Five minutes *at least*, and now Daniel really does feel hot, red-faced at the realization that several minutes of absent staring out the window, thinking about dick. And with that in mind, he's pinpointed another source of anxiety: measuring up, the latent fear that he's not quite big enough. Just under six inches—he knows, he's measured in private—and God, he wishes he was just that little bit bigger. It's an insecurity that runs parallel to his fears over his height. But if magically gifted a few inches, he knows where's he'd put, no doubts about it.

After all, he's always feared he's been a disappointment in bed, with Chloe most of all but there were other girls, too, and he's never been a confident lover, he knows that, wishes it was otherwise but there's always been this nagging doubt, a heady mix of guilt and anxiety. He can't help but think, with a larger penis, Chloe might not have gone looking elsewhere. It's not like she ever said anything. But also, she never *said* anything, come to think of it, ever had much to say about his dick.

Now, the heat in his cheeks is one of anger, the suppressed anger at her betrayal rising once more. Fuck. Was she really that shallow? He was an attentive lover. It's not like he skipped foreplay and was always happy to go down on her, if she asked. But apparently it wasn't enough. No: and if he'd had a cock like—well, like Galen's, evidently—none of this would've happened, and Chloe would been with him on this goddamn holiday, they'd be together, cozy and warm by an open fire in their rented cabin in the woods by the side of the lake. He turn and tuck a stray hair behind her ear, her eyes sparkling in the firelight after a couple glasses of wine, the pale curve of her neck, and she'd give a little moan: mmm, inviting him in, brushing her hair back so that he could kiss her, lightly, and with one hand cradle the soft weight of her breasts.

Fucking bitch. Daniel's hands curl into impotent fists at his side. Three years, down the drain. Tears sting his eyes. And his job. His stomach clenches, his throat tightens and he feels something rising, a strangled scream, a wracking sob, a cold trembling that weakens his legs. He hits himself, tight fist pounding his thigh—stop this, he tells himself—and again—the third time, a garter clasp snaps loose—and suddenly, all his anger and frustration and fear twists into as a laugh, a desperate, choking, gasping release that leaves him kneeling, braced against the wall, arms wrapped tightly around his torso, fingers curled into his hoody, digging into the corset beneath.

Eventually, he finds his feet, passes the back of his hand across his eyes. A deep breath, and he gives his head a shake. No. This, whatever the hell all of this is, it's not Chloe's fault. He wishes it was. But it's not. The fault, whatever it may have been, lies with him. Clearly: because why would any woman want to be with a man who discovers a compulsion to cross-dress after taking a bump to the head?

Daniel heads over to the table and the remains of the morning's breakfast. Empty bowls of porridge crusting over, bits of toast and crumbs on plates. The pan sits in the sink in water, the plates on the table. He starts to clean up the mess. He does this on automatic and feels a little tired, a little empty inside. But the routine of tidying away is restorative, always has been.

As a child, when everything periodically fell apart, when his dad retreated into one of his dark periods and with his sister going off the rails, it fell on him to try and hold everything together. This was how he did it. He pictures his dad, the unshaven face, puffy eyes, cheeks red with drink, staring, the silent accusation: this is your fault. Kara, screaming, it's not fucking fair. Stand up to him, do something. You're his son, not his fucking wife. Coward. Wuss. Loser. And he'd ignore her, tidy and clean for the three of them, until his dad bounced back, Kara calmed down, everything returning to normal.

Dishes in the dishwasher, he wipes down the stove and table. He gives the floor a quick sweep. He finishes by scrubbing out the pan, watches blobs of bloated oat swirl and disappear down the drain. He leaves the pot to dry on the rack, wipes his hands dry. Then he stands at the counter, staring out the window. Trees, snow, the slow steady drip of melting ice.

Then, he walks over to the cabinet where all the baking goods are stored. He opens the door. He grabs the bundle of letters from the back of the cabinet. Holding it loosely, he stares at the letters, turns them over slowly in his hands. The edges of the envelopes are stiff against the passage of his thumb.

It's not right, violating his host's trust like this. Yet he needs to know. Galen lied to him. He implied that Amber was dead. But in the letter, it's clear that she left him. Her departure was clearly conflicted: she loved him, she wrote, but had to escape. Why, from what? What was it about this man that drove her to leave?

Sunlight beams in from outside, bright off of reflected snow. The downstairs feels too open and exposed, the light hot and stifling. Daniel walks back upstairs, returns to Amber's bedroom. Yes, this makes more sense: Amber's letter in Amber's bedroom. He sits at the edge of the bed, posture corset-stiff and with legs crossed at the knee. The letters are in his hand and he passes his fingers along the string holding them together.

He wants to understand this woman better. He's not sure why, except that he's sitting in her room and wearing her underwear and last night held her husband as she must have, did for

him what she must have done many times. Ever since waking up in this house, Daniel has felt this woman's presence, as if her ghost was slowly seeping into him, somehow.

Only the dead leave ghosts. But this woman isn't dead, only absent. Yet the memory of her haunts this home, in every nook and cranny, in photographs and foodstuff and most concretely in this very room, and in the bathroom next door, in its drawers and vanity, and doubtlessly in hidden places he hasn't yet seen. Her scent lingers in the closet. Her corset grips his torso. In the shower he tastes her lipstick. And therefore, it seems fair to think of her ghost, haunting him and this house. Her presence permeates the room. After all, what is a ghost other than a memory embodying an absent body? A manifest absence, an echo of the voice unheard. So, yes – a ghost, even if the girl herself is alive; and for some reason Daniel feels a powerful affinity for her.

Perhaps, he thinks, if he understands this girl—this once-boy turned girl become Galen's wife—he might somehow come to terms with the compulsions emanating from the wound on his head.

He lays the bundle of letters down on the bed. Yes, he nods, I can do this. He begins to remove his clothes. It's not easy to accept but he sees now that this been his intention all morning. Why else did he ask for Galen's help, and keep the corset on for the day? He tosses the hoody aside and shucks his t-shirt and jeans and stands there in corset, stockings and panties. A shiver races up his spine, goosebumps rise across his thighs and arms, even though the room is warm. In the mirror, he sees himself, the slight pinch at the waist, the sheen of satin, and the way these garments contrast with his denuded skin. Muted blue panties, bikini cut he thinks, with delicate two-tone embroidered and mesh panels, a match for patterned stockings in black with wide, elaborate welts in a similar blue.

He makes no effort to take any of it off. Masculinity only brings pain; he's accepted this. Meanwhile, femininity—with what appears grossly stereotypical bias, shaved legs and lipstick and skirts and so on—brings relief, brings even more than that, pleasure. But what if he went all the way with this, and fully embodied Amber, if only for a few hours, while it's safe and with Galen gone?

Maybe, through a brief period of acceptance, he might move beyond the pain, come out the other side and leave it behind. This seems like sufficient justification to Daniel. A sort of token gesture, some kind of grudging synthesis of the anima, or reintegration of the feminine lurking in his Id, or—well, it doesn't really matter, does it? He can dress it up in whatever fucking psycho-babble justification he wants, at the end of the day he's a man, cross-dressing, and he's still not entirely sure what that means.

After all, he studied history, dabbled in sociology, only ever took Psy 101 at undergrad as an option, he can't fool himself he knows shit about how the deeper movements of the human mind. He prefers the absolute clarity of his drawings, where layer by layer apparent disorder resolves into the clean precision of a wireframe. Load paths, MEP systems, circulation routes and domestic envelopes: the joy of an architectural plan in which everything is revealed and secrets laid bare, a legible design to someday host an business, public assemblies, a family, a single man. Clear, concise, precise, rational, comprehensible: much better than whatever this fucking thing is, he thinks, lightly touching the bump on his head.

Daniel walks over to the dresser. Now that he's finally started, it happens quickly. Wrapped in an air of unreality, at times it feels as though he is watching himself from outside his

body. This is me, he thinks, as he opens the top drawer, I'm picking up a bra. He finds it beneath the peach briefs, next to the white thong with the floral pattern. He knows where it is because he saw it this morning and made note of it.

The push-up bra is stormy blue to match the panties, embroidered with an elaborate coiling lines and starburst patterns, with scalloped edging. He feels the texture of the bra, the padding between forefinger and thumb. The tag reads 38D. He wonders whether it'll fit. He's never worn a bra before. Sweat beads his forehead. Is he a 38? He hopes it fits. It's a very pretty item. Chloe would look great in it. It seems wrong to wear something like this. Surely the corset, the stockings are enough. After what's the point of a bra when he doesn't even have breasts?

But Amber does. Or did—she, at the point of wearing these specific clothes? Daniel imagines time collapsing between them, a shared moment in which the person she saw in those earliest photos, trepidation also roiling their belly, and equally flat-chested, reached for the same bra. He feels hot, and wonders if she did, too, cock curled up, striving against its compression.

Christ, but isn't that's really the point of all this? All of it, the pain, the clothes and humiliation, it's all been in service to bringing him closer to an understanding of this absent woman. He doesn't believe in fate or destiny, God or in any greater power beyond the limits of human understanding. And yet, here he stands in this woman's bedroom, dressing in her clothes so that he can read her letters and attempt to—what, internalise the self expressed by her written word? As though somehow, wearing panties is the route by which he might glimpse her soul. A stupid idea. And yet here he is.

He struggles with the bra. He slips his one arm through the strap, then the other, and it droops against his hairless chest. At first, he tries to hook the back as he's watched Chloe do, countless times. He feels for the clasp, the line of eye-and-hook closures, tries to line them up, misses, tries again, misses again, a third time and the strap slips down his bare shoulder. He tries again, sighs, eventually gives up and twists the bra around and does it up in the front. Then he spins it back, checks himself in the mirror. The shoulder straps don't sit right, and though the padding holds the cups' shape, the bra doesn't look right. Of course it doesn't, he doesn't have tits, briefly wonders how the bra would look—on a woman, of course—with full breasts, with Amber's 38D; and thinking this, he feels further stirring below, the slow straining against panties.

From a distance, he knows that this is weird, that this is wrong. Wear whatever you want, Galen told him. It'll make me happy knowing her clothes are getting a second life. But he's a man. Men don't wear clothes like this. Fine for Galen to show him a few pictures of cross-dressing for his wife's amusement. The man wears his masculinity with the unconscious ease that comes of never questioning it, of never having it questioned. He's the poster boy for old-school manliness: rugged outdoorsman, big chest, big arms, big—Daniel sighs—cock.

Meanwhile, he's a pencil-pushing desk wimp. Oh, sure, he keeps himself in shape, hits the gym when he can, when work allows. But he's all of five foot seven, maybe a hundred-forty pounds, give or take. And he sees how quickly his apparent masculinity is effaced. He feels a profound ache deep in his belly, a sense of failing at his gender. Panties and corset and stockings and bra, and with each garment he feels himself drawn somewhere new and arousing and terrifying. There's something terribly exciting about all this, mortifying, shame and failure, but also the sense of pushing up against a boundary, the thrill of the forbidden.

This wasn't enough for Amber, though, was it? She wasn't a crossdresser. She was—well, Kayden, presumably, once upon a time, and then at some later time, Amber. Her trans sexuality, he can't understand. It remains something alien to him. This is something he doesn't think he can understand, the how or why of it. That a person born one thing could choose to live as and embody something else seems too incredible. Transness is a dream defined by its waking intangibility, an ephemerality that defies the debasement of reality.

Of course, he does get it, as a concept, he's not stupid. At school, they touched on it briefly. Passing mentions in high school. An awareness from popular media. At university, a minor in Sociology brought up performance theory, Butler and Greer and others, sociolinguistics, the way girls talk and so on; it's how he met Chloe, they shared a class. And so, he gets that trans people exist. After all, he's seen them on the television. In the news, online, in that movie he watched with Chloe, the one with the drug cartel and vile tweets from way past, there goes the Oscar, right?

But he's also seen Machu Pichu on the television, a recording from the surface of Venus online, Trump flying a plane dropping poop on Americans. A war in Gaza and in the Ukraine. Margaret Atwood. All real things, in the abstract. Abstractions that happen, but to other people in distant places. Sure, somebody people climb through the jungles of Peru, thousands of tourists, even, every year and gaze in wonder at this thing, this place, reaching back in time. And maybe, every year, dozens or hundreds or even thousands of people born one thing become another.

And, sure, of course they do. To live is to constantly change; stasis is death, he read that somewhere. But there are limits, of course there are, how could there not be? He struggles to find the word—audacity, maybe, the sheer hubris of it, to simply carve a new body out of the old, the extremity of the change, how can anyone commit to such a thing, the bravery required, it's appalling.

Daniel looks in the mirror, touches the glass and meets fingertip-to-fingertip the person in there, and imagines Amber. The illusion that the distance between them collapsed earlier is gone, and she again seems unimaginable far away. And yet—once—he must have done the same—stood in front of a mirror and projected a future self that seemed unbearably distant. Identified, maybe, the most obvious and visible flaws: something in the chin, maybe, or the bridge of his nose; thin lips; a flat chest. And much as Daniel might begin to build up a literal blueprint of someone's home or office, Amber must have sketched out her future self, and built herself towards it, day by week by year, until—

She became Galen's wife, a man's woman, cared for and protected. But also, restrained, all that energy and will used to actualize herself, bound within the confines of another person's dream, countryside and wife. And then one day, to leave it all behind.

Daniel walks over to the closet, opens it, breathes deeply of the scent it releases, a little dry, slightly floral, alien fabrics and lingering perfumes. There is a tightening of his stomach, the back of his neck grows warm and suddenly, the corset feels all the more stifling. He passes his hand over the hanging dresses, blouses, a full array of women's clothing. I can't do this, he thinks, even as he lifts a blouse from the rack. It's bright yellow wrap, printed with exotic birds, with long sleeves and dangling tie. He has no idea what to pair it with. Even the fabric feels foreign, he's never worn something like this. He puts it back. Maybe a dress would be easier, it's a single piece, can't get that wrong.

It stands to reason that the present lies at the front of the closet and the past towards the back. The dresses and skirts and tops back here are varied, whereas the ones towards the front seem to occupy a narrower range of styles. She seemed to have defined a look and stuck with it, one part tradwife to one-part manic pixie girl—he thinks—not really knowing what either term means, having heard Chloe speak derisively of both. But that back of the closet is filled with short mini-dresses, sparkly skirts, something stretchy and shiny, a little black dress, three pairs of jeans on a single straining hanger, two cute tops, floral tops... it's too much. Daniel takes a step back. Gulping, he reaches in and guided by instinct grabs a hanger and pulls it from the pole.

It's the same brown dress with white spots that Amber wore in one of the photographs, the one of her baking for Galen. Daniel looks it over and smiles and somehow knows that this is the one, it'll fit. He removes it from the hanger. There's a zip in the back. He unzips it and bends down and it pools at his feet. He steps into the circle of the dress, feels how the garter stretches against his thigh, the delicate point of his foot in black stockings. Even as his stomach churns with the sense of doing something wrong, he realizes that he's very excited by this, nearly trembling and that the front of his panties have darkened, are moist with his excitement. He bites his lower lip, steps into the dress, pulls it up over his waist. It slithers over the sleekness of stockings and seems to fit, though snugly, especially at the hips. The corset helps, he thinks. He tugs it higher, passes his arms through the straps, straightens and feels for the first time a pull at his shoulders as he tugs at the hem.

The zipper behind takes some effort, but with a lot of craning and twisting, nearly putting his shoulder out, he finally gets it, feels how the dress draws tight around his chest, the bra and corset, and also at the neck. He fastens a final, small button closing the collar at the base of his neck.

He feels very hot, now. He desperately wants to check himself in the mirror. But, no. Not yet. Instead, he walks to the bathroom. The hem of the dress swishes around his thighs which each step. This excites him further and he blushes with the realization of how much this is turning him on. He fumbles through the cabinet, knocking things over with nervousness. Lipstick, pale pink. A tube of black mascara. An eye liner pencil. These, he thinks, he can handle. Standing at the little bathroom mirror, he raises the lipstick to his lips. He is startled by his own reflection, wide-eyed with both apprehension and eagerness. Then, he notices the dressing over his wound, still a little damp from his shower that morning. He pauses to gently peel it away. The wound beneath looks much better, half the size it was yesterday, but dark at the centre and a little red around the edges. He prods at the wound. Other than feeling a little spongy, it doesn't hurt.

This makes him happy, he grins and this refocuses his gaze to his lips, and now he holds the slender silver bullet, uncaps and twists out the lipstick and raises it to his mouth. This is the third time he applies lipstick in his life. Compared to that first time, he does it with greater confidence. Keeping his smile, he dabs at the middle of his lips, the cupid's bow, then slowly swipes down from the middle towards the corner of his mouth in single stroke. And again, the other way, and the lower lip, and then he gives a little pout in the mirror, feels a flutter in his belly. His application isn't quite even, he notices a few patches, wets his fingers and smooths over those areas. There. He smiles again and isn't quite sure whether it's natural or forced.

Then mascara and eyeliner. He takes five minutes to look up a video on Youtube, then tries for himself. The mascara terrifies him, blinking into something held so close to his eye. He

has long lashes, something he never noticed before. Afterwards, it feels weird, the unfamiliar weight of it, a fluttery sensation with each blink. Then the eyeliner. Holding a pencil that close to his eye is also a little scary, but he's got a steady hand, he's used to drawing fine lines, and this he finds easy.

Once done, he again avoids the mirror, which feels odd, considering the time just spent staring into. But that was fragmentation, a close examination of lips and eyes, not the whole. Now, those lips and eyes feel unfamiliar. A full face of makeup must feel like a mask, foundation and—concealer, moisturiser, creams and glosses, whatever else girls wear on their face, blush and eye shadow? He just knows that Chloe has loads of the stuff, all these bottle and pots and vials she never uses, though when he first met her, she did. She used to love to experiment with different looks, used to say she couldn't imagine, stepping outside without her makeup done.

Daniel returns to the bedroom, notes the letters waiting on the bed. He feels closer to the writer of those letters, now, she's been summoned by the tactile sensation of the clothes, he feels her, he imagines, as if she lies just beneath the skin, in the makeup, the taste and texture of lipstick, and the clothes too, of course. And yet—she's close—but not quite here, with him—something's missing. He hesitates, as he approaches the mirror, then rushes past, dress flapping at his knees as he avoids looking at himself, eager to see himself, afraid of what he might actually see. Instead, as if driven by some impulse, he digs around inside the closet once more.

At first, he's looking for shoes and there are several pairs, lined along the bottom. He picks a pair of slingbacks with a slight heel, open toed and black. They look around the right size. There are other shoes, wedges and stilettos and Uggs, ballet slippers and a pair of heeled, knee-high boots, all carefully arrayed across the bottom of the closet, but the slingbacks seem the most sensible choice. He wants to try out a little heel but doubts he could manage anything very high. He puts his choice aside for later.

For now, he continues to dig through Amber's belongings, searching the back of the closet, behind the clothes. Accessories hang from hooks, a few scarfs, sparkly and feathery things, belts, and two purses. Daniel takes one, tosses it onto the bed next to the letters, and then searches through some shelves at the top of the closet, using a collapsible stool he finds tucked away at one end. As if he knew it'd be there, kept in the hardest to reach back recess of the storage space, he finds a medium sized, unlabelled cardboard box and takes it down.

Daniel kneels and opens the box and realises he's found the foundational vestiges of Amber's earliest self. There are several pairs of well-used garments, fraying slightly: girdles, a sturdy looking pair of panties padded at the hips, others with an internal pouch which he eventually deduces is for tucking genitals flat. He finds two wigs carefully stored away, one long and blonde, the other shoulder-length and brunette. There's something that looks like a rolled, lumpy piece of peach-coloured rubber that unfurls into a pair of breasts, some kind of pull-on vest with boobs made of silicone. And finally, stashed in a cloth bag with a Farm Boy logo, what appears to be a cluster of disconnected tits—three separate pairs in different sizes—and he grabs one and holds it up to the light, examines it with some bemusement, the colouration of the protuberant nipple, feels it heft in his hand.

He finds two that seem a match in colour and size, estimates they're about right for the bra he's wearing. Leaning forward, he works the first breast into the bra. It settles awkwardly in its padded cup. Then again with the second one. Holding the breast forms in place, he works

them around a bit until they sit more comfortably against his skin. Now the bra rests lopsided, and he fiddles with the shoulder straps, pulling them tighter, until the underwire sits securely against his skin, and the fake tits are unlikely to fall out. The silicone is cool against his skin. A shiver trembles down his spine. There's a weight felt in the straps digging into his shoulders. He rolls his shoulders, gives his chest a little wiggle, feels the counterweight movement. Weird. Like everything else, he imagines it quickly becoming uncomfortable, a strain to the back. But also, like the corset, the makeup, fading into familiarity with time.

Now, he takes the brunette wig. He turns—his chest bangs into the closet door. Bouncing back, he curses, feels an inexplicable surge of anger, then blushes. Idiot, he thinks. More carefully, he extricates himself from the closet. The wig looks well worn, inner lining frayed with bits of plastic flaking away. He orients it correctly and pulls the wig down over his head.

This reminds him of high school, messing around with other kids during drama lessons, waiting their turn, giggling at pre-millennium styling, laughing self-consciously in the mirror. *Friends* was freshly back on Netflix. He tried on a wig, What the fuck is that? he remembers Jack asking, one of the dickheads from his class. Daniel flicked his hair back, grinning. I think it's called a Rachel? Jesus, man, Jack answered, take it off, you're freaking me out. Gay, man. So fucking gay.

In comparison, this wig is a tight fit but the hair feels real and falls more naturally. It's uncomfortable and he's conscious of how closely the tight band around his forehead lies to his bump. But, with the longer hair, he's also able to twitch errant bangs down and keep it hidden.

Huh, bangs: I've never had bangs before, Daniel thinks. At least, not since the Rachel.

Finally, he returns to the shoes he picked earlier. It takes a minute of fiddling with the strap and the feel of tight across the back of his ankle is distracting, and there's a little pinch at his toes but otherwise they fit well enough.

Standing, he wobbles for a moment, steadies himself and grins self-consciously. He takes a few steps, into the corridor. It's easier on the hardwood than on the rugs in Amber's room. He walks to the end of the corridor, past Galen's room, turns and returns. It's only an inch of heel but thin and feels precarious and he's acutely aware of how it feels, the slight tension in the calf, the instinct it instills to move his hips differently.

He feels, briefly, like an absolute sissy. Some kind of pansy, swishing along in women's clothing, clacking steps in heels. Heat rises in his cheeks and his heart pounds. He stops and take a deep breath. No; he clamps down on those thoughts. Whatever this is, it isn't that, that's not who I am. This is—an experiment; I'm doing this to get closer to *her*; I'm not a crossdresser. And besides, his head doesn't hurt, his mind's the clearest it's been in ages.

With this in mind, he returns to the bedroom—his steps a little shorter, not quite mincing but more precise and considered—picks up the purse, hangs it off his shoulder. Then, he collects the letters, tucks them inside the purse. His phone, too, because why not? Then, because he's on a role, a few more items: some random bits of makeup, his wallet and keys. The weight at his hip feels reassuring, somehow.

Now, he's ready. He steps in front of the mirror, keeping his eyes deliberately low, delaying the reveal, and anticipating the moment when—he doesn't know, disappointment, exhilaration, wrenching sickness, a euphoric gasp, something, the crossing of a line he previously never suspected existed. First, his feet, dark in stockings, poised in heels, the

delicate strap at the ankle, sparkling in the late morning sun. Then, a deep breath. He realizes that he is, in fact, afraid. But why, and of what?

He wrenches his eyes upwards, and there here is, in the mirror. It is clearly him in the mirror, and yet also not him. No magical transformation has taken place. He does not resemble the beautiful young woman in the photographs downstairs. Daniel sees in his reflection nothing more than himself, wearing a pretty dress. His lips are pink and his chest sticks out in twin cones: that's it.

And yet. No. Not the same. The solid comfort of familiarity melts away and he is left unsure, gnawing his lip, for it is clear that what he sees in the mirror is *not* him, or at least, not entirely, and he sees it now, how he resembles her. Lips appear fuller, eyes a little wider and more expressive. The dress cleaves to a figure not quite feminine, nor entirely masculine. Legs are slim and slender, and fingers poke at longer hair. Turning a little, he watches how the dress flares out, his slim calves, and the way the dress falls across his ass.

He feels—

Daniel doesn't know what he feels. Neither disgust nor joy, shame or liberation. At most, a profound yet impossible to express disquietude. Beyond that, maybe a slight discomfort, the bite of corset and shoes and underwire, but also mild pleasure, the gentle pressure gripping his torso, lace at his thighs, his bum, the smoothness at his crotch. The freedom felt in fabric fluttering at his knees.

And indefinite length of time passes in which Daniel examines himself in the mirror. Winter sun lengthens across the floor. Water drips outside the window as the storm's icicles melt, each drop falling like diamonds. Eventually, he reaches up and touches his cheek, his ear, and finally his throat, fingers lying at his collarbone. There is something happening inside of him that he cannot understand.

It's getting late, he thinks. I should read the letter and get out of these clothes.

He pulls the second letter from the purse and unfolds it. As the first, it is several hand-written pages long. The first few times he tries to read the words make no sense to him. He has to take a moment to stare out the window and collect himself. A deep breath, and he resumes reading. He reads the opening line.

Did I even want to be a girl before I met you? Amber writes.

Daniel finishes the first side of the first page and turns the letter over. The page trembles between his fingers. He's only just started reading again when he hears his voice:

"Knock, knock, buddy."

Galen stands just outside the room.

Daniel did not hear him return, did not hear the sound of the truck outside, the door opening and closing, or footsteps on the stairs. Gasping, he thrusts the letter into the purse, the pages crumpling. Then he spins, facing the man in the doorway. Daniel feels his face glow with heat and his heart pounds and suddenly any illusion as to what he was doing is ripped away, and he is left feeling bare and exposed, wearing women's underwear in a dress and makeup and heels, pervert, a sissy, a failure of a man, clutching his purse to his side, painted mouth open to—explain—but nothing comes out, as he sees the expression on the other man's face.

Galen grips the doorframe. His knuckles are white with the force of his grip, and his eyes are wide. The expression on his face is unlike any Daniel has ever seen before: at once livid, wretched and... pleased, roiling in quick succession. He stands frozen, and so does Daniel. The man's gaze rakes over him. Daniel clutches the purse in front of him as though to ward off the other man. What the fuck am I doing, he thinks, this can't work—

Suddenly, Galen rushes forward. He grabs Daniel by the upper arm, so tightly it hurts. "Amber," he gasps, and his voice is a hissing whisper, a strangled shout, Daniel can't tell over the rushing sound in his ears, and only knows that suddenly, the man has him in his grip. His throat clenches tight, with fear, with shame.

And then Galen kisses him. The kiss is forceful, on the mouth, lips crushing against his. Daniel tries to jerk back. He feels the man's beard against his skin. Galen's grip is too strong, his hand tightens painfully around Daniel's bicep. Daniel opens his mouth to protest, and in that instant the other man's tongue slips past his. Galen releases one arm to hold him by the back of the head. He holds him steady and kisses him deeply. The other hand also strays, along his side, fleetingly touches his ass before taking him by the waist. Fingers curl into the dress and grip the corset beneath.

Held so closely, Daniel tries to wriggle free. He moans in distress around the tongue invading his mouth. Yet even he can tell the sound comes out like softly mewled passion, his movements like squirms of arousal. This can't be happening. A man is kissing him. This isn't what he wanted, this wasn't the plan, he's not ready for this. His legs feel weak in the knee and he goes limp in this man's arms. Now the kisses move to his neck, his ear, breath hot and panting and there's a smell, too, of sweat and smoke and more, a manly scent, that of hard work, physical exertion, the strength and vigour of masculine endeavour.

Also, arousal: Daniel feels Galen's hardness pushing into his belly. He remembers the size of it from last night, pictures it vividly. Heavy panting, hands roaming, latching onto his chest, squeezing and a deep grunt of approval. Rumbling excitement, and Galen pushes him back against the wall, one hand on his chest, the other hiking the dress. A garter belt snaps sharply against his thigh. Then, a hand cups his ass, grabs and kneads. "I've—" Galen hisses into his neck, nips at his ear—"Missed you so much," and then he holds Daniel's face between his hands, and his eyes burn with passion as he descends for another kiss, and his breath heaves with desire—

And Daniel is so terribly aroused, too.

In the moment before Galen kisses him again, he yanks himself away from the man, stumbling in heels across the carpet, his wig askew.

"Am—"

"I'm not Amber!" Daniel screams, and twists away. He flees out the room and down the stairs, a clatter of heels, sharp snap of the dress with each stride. The purse bounces awkwardly against his hip. He can barely see for the wig. His breath comes in ragged gasps. He stands, lost for a moment. He hears a voice call out from above—he can't make out what it says—footsteps—and in a panic, he rushes for the door. He fumbles at the doorknob for a moment, steadies himself, yanks it open. Cold air slams into him but he's too hot with fear and others feelings he can't process to really feel it. Snow snaps at his ankles; his steps are slippery and precarious as he crunches across the driveway. His car—he sees it—he's never been so happy

to see his battered old Honda Civic. He grabs at the car door; it's locked. Keys, fucking keys! In the purse, oh God, thank goodness for the purse, he yanks it open. A few objects come clattering out, mascara, lipstick. Who gives a fuck—keys! and with long familiarity he gets the door open and slips in behind the wheel and slips the key into the ignition.

The engines wheezes once, twice, catches and turns over. He hits the gas. The wheels spin. Snow and gravel spray. The treads catch. The car leaps forward. He twists the wheel and forces the car onto the road and with his heaving breath fogging the windscreen, Daniel is away.

Chapter Eight

Daniel sits in his car, parked by the side of the narrow road. Outside, a sky the colour of a robin's egg, brilliant with the sort of clarity that only happens in winter. Cloudless, the pale disc of sun shimmers blindingly off the open snowy field by the road. Light stings tears into his eyes. It's cold, too; it seems that with the accident, the car's heater works even worse than before.

Gripping the steering wheel tight, he doesn't know what to do. He kissed me, Daniel thinks. No; he kissed Amber, he thought he was kissing her. But still, a man kissed me. A man's tongue in my mouth. A shudder passes through him and hiccups, a sigh, a strangled sob. A man's hands—touched me, stroked me with passion: neck and shoulder, he grabbed my ass. Pushed me to the wall, and with stark clarity Daniel can still feel the insistent push of the other man's erection into his belly. Galen had been so excited, so turned on.

Fuck, and so was I, Daniel admits. Fuck.

He shivers.

The dress is too thin, even with the extra layer of corsetry beneath. His head hurts and he lets go of the wheel and hugs himself and thinks, what the hell am I going to do? His suitcase, all his stuff, it's back at the cabin. He can't go back there. But all he's got is what he's wearing: knee-length dress, corset and stockings, wig and heels. The wig sits on the seat next to him looking very much like a small, brown dog curled up asleep. And he's got the purse. In it, his wallet, driver's license, credit cards. That's something at least. A lot, actually. And some makeup, he thinks ruefully, for fuck's sake. Those letters. And my phone.

As though summoned by his thoughts, the phone vibrates.

Daniel jumps. He gnaws his lip for a moment and then slips his phone out of the purse. He doesn't recognize the number. It's him, has to be him, who else could it be? I shouldn't answer, he thinks, then taps answer on the screen.

"Hello?"

"Hey, bro."

Her voice is the final drop of water that overflows a river. For years, sluggish, thick, and weak, the water barely flowed. Now, like after a great rain, the water rides high and spills over its banks. Why, now? It doesn't matter, it's happening and at the sound of his sister's voice, something shifts within him, a subtle giving way of silt and soil. Just like that, a memory dislodges, the first of many, slots quietly into active recollection. Slowly, his forehead comes to rest on the steering wheel.

"Hey Kara."

There's a pause before she answers with guarded concern. "You okay?"

A dry, hollow chuckle: "No."

Silence, ambient hiss of the distance between them. "What's going on, Dan?"

He sighs, considers hanging up. Then it just sort of slips out. "Kara, when I was a kid—did I ever wear a dress?"

Eleven years old—no, twelve when it started, because it was spring, ground soggy with melt water and slush, bedroom walls dripping with condensation in the morning. Half-way through grade seven, and it was a terrible year. Dad moved them to a run-down duplex on the outskirts of Kitchener in January. Leaving his old school behind, his friends and the life he'd known was hard. Very hard, and it was also the year his sister barely spoke to him. They'd been so close before that. They'd had to be. But now she was fourteen, grade nine and had new interests, things he barely understood, makeup and sex and talk about periods that made him uncomfortable. She didn't want him hanging around her, especially at their new school.

Her bedroom was upstairs, near Dad's. Daniel's bedroom was in the basement. In the corner behind a slatted door, under a single bare bulb, sat the central heating. The big tank rumbled and rattled into life in the middle of the night, yet his room always felt cold and damp. A stench of oil lingered. A tiny window near the ceiling let in a little light, but walls covered in cheap laminate panelling, chipped and pitted with age, kept the room dark and claustrophobic.

For the year they lived there, every morning he woke feeling nauseous. He cried a lot. He hated the house. He hated his new school.

But he liked Taylor.

"Pow."

Lightly forested woods behind the house. A fight with his sister in which his dad took her side, as he always seemed to do these days. Kicking at sodden logs, taking swings with a heavy stick at birch trees still heavy with thaw, the satisfying *thwack*, *woomph* of wet snow falling to the ground. Sun glinting between sparse trees, early buds spotting green across branches. Again and again, branch wielded as a sword, flailing anger giving way to performance, and now he's Naruto, ninja-stepping through the forest; Inu Yasha, swinging his oversized sword; Roronoa Zoro, dual- and triple-wielding slender whips of wood.

And then: "pow!"

Crouched behind a fallen tree, knee dark from the wet earth, with a stick of his own held to shoulder in rifle position, a boy. And again: "bang!" The boy flashed a bright smile, one eye hidden beneath the dropping edge of a red toque mottled with wet snow. "Gotcha."

Daniel hesitated for just a second and then, grinning, shouted out: "substitution jutsu!" jumping to one side, tossing his branch over his shoulder.

"That's cheating!"

"It's not cheating, it's ninja technique."

"Against a gun?" The boy rolled his eyes. "I'm the White Death. You were dead before you even heard me"

Daniel hadn't heard of the White Death, and the boy took great pleasure in explaining: Finnish sniper, World War 2, over five hundred confirmed kills. "I'm Taylor," the boy said, and he lived up the road, in the big house at the top of the hill.

"Daniel." He pushed out his hand, red with cold and snow. The other boy gave it a shake with solemn seriousness.

"I've seen you," he said. "At school. You're new, right?"

Apprehensive, Daniel nodded.

"Your sister's in my grade. Kara, right?"

Another nod.

"I don't have a sister. Or a brother." And his parents were often absent, too. "Yeah, my Dad's in the army. Really important. So, I don't see him much, he's always off to Ottawa or Washington or Belgium or something." As for his mom, she was an actor. "She's beautiful," Taylor said. "Like, really beautiful. You'll have to come around someday. My mom has all these dresses and wigs and stuff, it's cool. But she's super busy so I'm often alone at home. I used to go to Grandma's after school but now she's in a home but I'm old enough now, so I take care of myself."

Taylor went quiet. He had clear blue eyes and long lashes that sparkled with flecks of melting snow. Messy blond hair, and cheeks and lips that looked a bit like a girl's, Daniel thought, but it suited him. Digging a hole in the melting snow with his toe, Taylor suddenly asked, "Um, would you like that?" He didn't quite make eye contact but smiling shyly, blurted out the rest, "I mean, come and play at my place?"

Daniel nodded.

First time he went over, he met Taylor's mom. He saw the strong resemblance between her and her son. She really was beautiful, maybe the most beautiful woman he'd ever met in person. She wore a blue dress and had long blond hair and didn't look like any other mom he'd ever seen, none of them dressed like she did or had such red lips or wore high-heeled shoes in the house. Yet there was something cold about her, and distant. When she spoke, her eyes always seemed elsewhere and when he answered, she didn't seem to listen. Daniel thought that maybe she didn't like him but then saw she acted the same way towards Taylor.

"Mom's super busy," Taylor said. He munched on a mustard-covered over-baked pogo. "You played Virtua Fighter before?" thrusting his chin towards the screen, selecting 'Arcade' with the controller.

Daniel shook his head. They'd never been able to afford a Nintendo or Xbox or PlayStation.

"Pick a character. I'll pick Sarah—" on the screen, a tall young woman with a blonde ponytail, with a passing resemblance to Taylor's mom. "You pick—whichever you like."

Uncertain, Daniel flicked through the characters, watching them pop up on the screen, faces large against a bright swirling background. He paused over the face of a smiling Japanese girl in a kimono. He liked her, she was cute. He glanced at Taylor. Eyes bright, a little smile on the boy's lips.

"That's Aoi," Taylor said. "I unlocked all her outfits," he said, proudly.

But Daniel knew he couldn't pick *her*, even though he wanted to, because that'd be weird, he was a boy after all and playing as a girl felt wrong. The fact that Taylor picked a girl wasn't relevant. It was his house, his gaming console, he could do what he wanted. So Daniel flicked over to a male character, a stern-faced Japanese man with black, spikey hair.

"It doesn't matter," Taylor said. "Just pick anyone."

Daniel bit his lower lip and went back to Aoi.

Daniel knew he'd never invite the boy to his place. It would've been too embarrassing, and even thinking of his new friend's reaction made his stomach go watery, like he was about to piss himself. Taylor's house was open and tidy and very precise, decorated with brilliant flowers in large free-standing vases, with paintings on the wall—real ones in wooden frames and not just poster copies with tears along the edge. The hallway floors were real wood and the kitchen gleamed with white marble. You could track Taylor's mom's slow passage through the house, the click of heels against the hard floors. His friend's bedroom didn't smell wet or oily. The only negative Daniel could think of, when he visited, and he visited often over the following months, was that the house always felt a little too cold. He made a point of wearing thick socks when he visited.

About a month after that first visit, as the school year was creeping into its final weeks, Taylor asked him if he wanted to come over and play. It was lunch, at school, in the canteen. Taylor normally sat and ate with the grade nines and, just like Kara, ignored Daniel at school. But this day, he surreptitiously took him aside. "Hey, you want to come over?" he asked and there was something in his voice, an eagerness Daniel hadn't heard before, one that bordered on pleading, desperate excitement in his eyes. "I'd like to show you something."

That early summer afternoon, with the sun shining overhead in a sky dotted with thin clouds, Daniel trudged up the hill to Taylor's house. The house sat back from the road, half-hidden behind a row of pine and oak. But walking up the drive, there was always a moment when the house stood in full view against the sky behind, and every time Daniel paused and took a moment to appreciate the sleek lines and wide windows, concrete, glass and slate, how modern it looked, clean and perfect. He felt an indescribable yearning, so powerful and intense he had to stop walking. But only briefly before taking the stone steps circling up to the front door, two at a time.

He pressed the doorbell, listened to the music chime, then knocked on the door.

One second, Taylor's voice from the other side. There was a short wait. Then, the door opened.

At first, Daniel didn't recognise his friend. Taylor said he didn't have a sister. A cousin, maybe? Then Daniel blinked, and it was Taylor standing framed in the doorway. The boy's hair was held back by a sparkly, pink Alice band. The boy's lips were also pink, shiny with gloss, split in a wide smile, eager and hopeful. The boy wore a soft off-white blouse and a short, pleated skirt over white pantyhose, and bright black shoes with buckles and a blocky heel.

"Oh, *do* come in," Taylor exclaimed, taking Daniel's hand.

Daniel stood, unsure what to say or do. He laughed, a little nervously, and then so did Taylor. "Surprise!"

"Uh, yeah. Wow." Daniel careful kept his face neutral, even as he felt warmth crawl up his neck, and a rushing sound in ears. Was his friend really wearing lip gloss, like the girls at school? He certainly *looked*—well, girlish if not quite a girl, and actually quite cute. It made Daniel feel funny, to think that, to see another boy as *cute*. "I—thought we were going to play Xbox?"

"We are!" Taylor giggled. "But Mom and Dad won't be home until late? And I thought, like, it might be fun to play a little dress up?" His friend spoke with a slight lisp, softer and breathier. He took Daniel's hand, and his grip was light, fingernails gleaming with a light polish. "This way?"

Taylor led him through the kitchen to his parents' bedrooms, a part of the house he'd never seen. Taylor's parents slept in separate rooms, and his mom's room was very bright, spacious and immaculately clean. To Daniel, it also seemed indescribably feminine. There had never been anything comparable in his house. Soft pastels and pale eggshell, back-lit mirrors and flowers, a lot of pink and peach and purple. Flowers and an eruption of lavender in a tall gilt vase in one corner. A wide vanity with a cushioned stool. And behind a smoothly sliding door, the largest closet Daniel had ever seen.

"Pretty cool, right?" Taylor flitted into the closet, passing his hand along the trailing hem of skirts and dresses, more than Daniel had ever seen in one place outside of a shop in the mall. "Isn't it just..." Taylor trailed off, as though searching for the word. He stopped and fell back into a curtain of hanging dresses with a breathy laugh, arms spread wide. "Dreamy?"

"Your mom sure has a lot of clothes."

Daniel cautiously joined his friend in the closet. He saw racks of carefully positioned shoes and a dozen shelves laid out with carefully folded tops. Soft blouses on hangers. Scarfs, purses and belts. And wide, shallow drawers that slid silently out from the wall, filled with underwear: bras and panties and pantyhose and things Daniel didn't recognize, but blushed to look at.

"And these are the ones she doesn't even wear?" The way Taylor spoke, the little twittering twist at the end of each sentence, like he was asking a question, he'd never heard that from his friend before. "So long as I put everything back, she never notices." Taylor plucked a top from one of the shelves, that shimmered and draped like slowly flowing gold over his arm. He turned to Daniel, eyes bright with expectation, glossy lips curving in a hesitant smile. "Want to try? It's just so much fun."

Daniel's chest felt tight and for all the size of the closet, it suddenly felt claustrophobic. His forehead felt hot, and the way his heart pounding in his chest—so hard and fast—for a moment, he couldn't breathe. He had to turn away, as if examining the rack of clothes nearest him. Closely packed dresses, blues and indigos and purples, in fabrics he didn't recognize, girls' textures, soft and shiny and silky and smooth that slipped through his fingers like dreams upon waking, or the memory of a parent's love.

"I—" he stammered. "I don't know."

"I felt funny about it, too, the first time," Taylor said.

Daniel faced his friend. "Isn't it—wrong?"

A flash of disappointment in his friend's eyes, maybe even anger. And beneath that, Daniel saw there was fear, too. He realized now the risk this new friend, his only friend, was taking in sharing this side of himself. Taylor was popular at school. Other kids liked him, boys and girls. But for some reason, he'd chosen to share this with *him*, invited Daniel into this secret of his.

"Is it really okay?" Daniel said.

Relief washed over Taylor's face, quickly replaced by an ecstatic grin. "It is! I promise. And it's a lot of fun, too? You'll see."

That first time, Taylor chose his outfit, clothes that mirrored his own: a simple skirt and top, Alice band and pantyhose. Like this, Taylor explained, roll the leg into a ring, like a doughnut? Then point your toes and then you kind of stand and hop a bit and yank them up, you got it? His friend showed him how to apply gloss to his lips, and then they went to Taylor's room and played Xbox. Daniel could hardly concentrate, at first, all those new and unfamiliar sensations, tacky goop on his lips, the way the skirt settled as he sat, legs skewed to one side, on the floor. Knees together! Taylor laughed. You don't want any boys to see your panties, do you?

Daniel blushed.

Afterwards, just before they returned to their boy clothes and meticulously placed everything back, Taylor brought him to the full-length mirror in his mother's room. You look really pretty, Taylor said and then waited, expectantly, and so Daniel answered back the same, yeah, you do, too. You really think so? Taylor scrutinized himself in the mirror, delicately tucking a stray hair back behind his ear. Do you?

Daniel nodded.

Then, Taylor faced him, and there was something solemn and serious in his eyes. "Thank you, Daniel," he said, and suddenly leaned forward, and kissed his cheek, lightly. "Like girls do," he said, "and again on the other side," and another kiss. Daniel lightly held his fingers to the feathery sensation of a kiss, the hint of gloss against his skin.

"What are you asking me, Daniel?" Kara's voice is guarded, carefully neutral.

There's a lengthy pause. Daniel drags his head up, sinks back into the seat. Outside, a gust of wind makes eddies of loose snow, swirling across the narrow country road. "I don't—you know, it's funny, I'd completely forgot—until just now—that kid, up the road? You remember, that shitty house outside of Kitchener. Up the hill, that big house. Taylor, he was in your grade."

"Yeah," Kara says. "I remember Taylor."

"I used to go around to his place after school a lot. And one day—" he takes a deep breath—"I don't know how I could've forgotten this, when I got there, he was dressed, well, you know, he was dressed like a girl. And he asked if I wanted to play dress up with him."

"And thinking about it now, and I guess I haven't really for a long time, those were tough times, you know, after Mom—"

"Yeah, no shit."

He takes a deep breath. "I was so lonely, Kara."

Silence.

"You stopped talking to me that year. And—"

"It's my fault, is that what you're saying?"

“—Dad, he—”

“We really going to do this now?” Kara interrupts.

Another lengthy silence, the hiss of trans-Atlantic cabling and the distance between them.

“He was the only friend I had, Kara. And—that house on the hill—it made me feel...” He trails off, and he pictures that old house with stunning clarity, the washed concrete, dark, narrow windowpanes, and modern angles.

He hears the sigh from her end, the sound of his sister’s shifting position, settling in for a longer talk. “Is that all you remember?” his sister asks.

They dressed up together a lot after that, as the school year wound down, those long months of summer and into September. The first few visits, nothing changed. Pogos or pizza pops in the oven, and usually video games, sometimes Lego or messing around on Taylor’s computer. Much to Taylor’s frustration, parents suddenly often home in the evenings. Never at the same time, though. During that period, Taylor’s mom’s behaviour was all too familiar to Daniel, he recognized in her his own father’s dark spells. She always had a glass of wine in hand, and the slow steady tap of her heels followed them around the house. But she was still beautiful, Daniel thought, no, all the more beautiful for her tragic posture, as she stopped at every mirror and touched her hair, or fixed her makeup, and scrutinized herself with a gaze that wavered between pride and horror.

As for Taylor’s dad, he was an intimidating figure, dark, deep-set eyes under short-cropped black hair and a long, crooked nose. He was taciturn and tall, with strong arms and a pot belly, and he didn’t resemble his fair-haired son in the least. On the few occasions he was home, he watched the boys from a distance with an expression of mild bafflement. He rarely spoke and seemed to spend most of his time locked away in his study.

But the very first time no one was home, Taylor was giddy with glee at the door. “It’s just us,” he exclaimed, dragging Daniel into the house and straight to his room. Using a stool, he pulled a box from the furthest back corner of a high shelf over his closet. “These are mine,” he said, proudly. He showed him girl’s clothes, cheaper than anything the mother owned but also the kind of thing a teenage girl might actually wear. “And these,” Taylor added, blushing a little, revealing two bras, and matching panties.

“You bought all this?” He fingered the tag on a black tank top.

“Online, mostly. These are from Sears.” He held up a bra, white cotton with a floral print. “La Senza Girls. I’ve got money saved up. I’ve got an allowance, and Mom and Dad give me money when I finish the year with good grades. And Christmas and birthday gifts, you know. The hardest part was getting it delivered on a day when I knew nobody would be home.”

They tried on the bras, strapping each other in, giggling at the fit, stuffing the empty cups with Kleenex. “Let’s pick each other’s outfits this time?” Taylor insisted and dressed Daniel in denim shorts from his mom’s closet, black tights and a sparkly crop top. In return, and because he knew it was expected, Daniel dressed his friend in his new clothes, a swirly knee-length blue skirt and the black tank top. After that, he expected video games, but Taylor held him back with a touch.

“We’re dressed like girls,” he said. “Why don’t we try acting like girls?”

Daniel bit his lip. “What do girls do?”

“Well, what does your sister get up to at home?”

Mostly stays in her room, he wanted to say. Keeps the door shut most the time. Sometimes I can hear her crying. She yells at me if I try and go in. I used to sit at the foot of her bed, and we used to talk. About—he couldn’t even remember; it didn’t matter, it was being together that mattered, the two of them in the absence of everything else. He felt intensely and suddenly the deep gulf between him and his sister, the gap left in his life where she’d always been. He nearly cried; but not wanting to seem unmanly, forced it down. Instead, forcing a weak smile, he said:

“She spends a lot of time texting friends. And...” Daniel shrugged. “Like, she’s really messy and there’re all these Seventeen magazines lying around her room. And she’s always playing music too loudly, you know, Gwen Stefani and Avril Lavigne, that kind of stuff. Dad complains a lot. So, I guess she reads and listens to music and...” Furrowing his brow, he made a show of thinking. “And putting on lip gloss and stuff? There’s all kinds of makeup things in her room, and I’ve caught her, you know, posing in the mirror and taking pictures of herself on her phone?”

Taylor nodded sagely, as if this confirmed his precise expectations of what girls and sisters do. Never mind that not a word of it was true: when Kara listens to music, it was angry and dark, and she’s never leafed through a copy of Seventeen in her life, as far as he knows.

“Then that’s what we’ll do,” he said. “We’ll put on music and do each other’s makeup and do quizzes and... and...” he trailed off, and his cheeks turned pink, and then in a much smaller voice, finished, “and gossip about boys.”

“I wonder what happened to that fucking rich boy twink,” Kara says.

Daniel snorts. “You like rich boys. Aren’t you with one right now?”

“Yeah, and he’s a bit of a twink, too.” Kara laughs. “I sure can pick ‘em.”

“You okay over there, in your nice chateau?”

“Yeah.” He can almost hear the shrug over the phone. “And how’re you doing in your little solo cabin getaway?”

He lets out a little bark of laughter.

She goes silent.

So does he, until eventually, she asks, “What’s going on, Dan?”

Another shiver passes through him. He slumps deeper into the car seat, arm thrown across his face. He’s exhausted, his head hurts as if it’s going to explode. It’s growing colder, too. Cold, though not his face, heat radiating in waves from his temple to the point of breaking out in a sweat. Very gently, he prods his injury with his free hand. The skin over his temple is hot to touch, the old pain pulsing just beneath his fingertips.

I need to get in somewhere warm, he thinks. Mental breakdowns shouldn't happen in the front seat of an idling car by the side of the road. He groans. Is this what's happening? Is this what going crazy feels like?

"Dan?" There's an edge to his sister's voice, now. "Talk to me."

He groans. "What do you want me to say?"

"Are you okay?"

"No," he says, and remembers—

The last time he pretended he was a girl.

Daniel wore a blue skirt over comfy leggings, and an oversized tee that hung off one shoulder. It showed off his bra strap, pink; he liked that. Lying on his stomach with his legs up; he liked that. The polished sheen on his nails as he flicked through the magazine; he liked that, too, he liked all of it and maybe most of all, he liked that he didn't feel lonely or angry or sad or nervous. He felt—not quite happy, but rather—quiet, the constant low buzz of anxious thoughts gone silent. He felt at peace and beyond that, utterly comfortable, a half hour gone in a blink, spent reading: something about mascara, then real stories of teenage girl trauma, a period at a pool party, and tripping in heels in front of a crush; stuff he couldn't have even imagined reading a year ago, let alone find fascinating, but which now filled his tummy with a strange, disconcerting warmth. He could have spent the rest of the night like that, just quietly, idly reading, in a skirt and slowly kicking his legs, with Muchmusic in the background.

A languid stretch. A flick of the page. The taste of strawberry gloss on his lips. A sudden inexplicable smile, lying on a friend's bed and sharing their company.

It was Friday night. They *never* played dress-up on Friday because either Taylor was away or one of his parents was home over the weekend. But not that Friday, for whatever reason, and early in the week Taylor invited him over, eyes bright with excitement. Daniel crafted a simple lie, something about homework. Totally unnecessary. It's not like his dad *wanted* him home that evening, staring with blank eyes rimmed with red at the blue rectangle light of the tv screen. Dad just grunted, and Kara didn't care. Over the course of the week, the excitement built, a steadily rising tension in his stomach. It felt—different, this time, though he didn't know why, but his hands shook as Daniel packed his bag for the night.

A sleepover! and Taylor with typical enthusiasm spent the week planning out a whole, girly night. They'd make cookies, eat them while watching a scary movie, maybe a romantic one, or why not both? and do each other's hair, gossip about the other girls at school, and maybe some cute boys, who has a crush on who, and who was breaking up, and isn't he just *dreamy*? Practice makeup, maybe do a skin care regime, and and and – and whatever else girls do on a sleepover.

"We're going to have so much fun!" Taylor's lips were frosted pink, hair pinned back with clips decorated with tiny plastic gemstones. He dragged Daniel straight to his bedroom, and the energy was infectious, it *was* going to be so much fun. They quickly changed. The hesitation Daniel once felt was gone, replaced instead by a fluttery, almost queasy anticipation. Those earlier visits, he felt like a total pervert as he stepped into a skirt. It was forbidden to boys. Like

wearing makeup or painting their fingernails a cute colour. Or talking about other boys in that way. Things he only did it because his new friend talked him into doing it.

Not anymore. Daniel couldn't deny the enjoyment he took from all this, how much these nights had come to mean to him. Taylor wasn't forcing him, he wanted to do this. He liked how he it felt to put on these clothes, the actual process of stepping into a skirt or pulling on pantyhose, the effort required to look good, it felt like a privilege. And beyond that, being in these clothes instilled a sense of possibility that simmered just beneath a skin, a tightness in his chest that felt like the shortness of breath felt in the tension swelling the air before the distant rumble and loud crack that preceded the breaking of a storm, heavy and dark on the horizon.

Cookies and makeup and the first round of dressing up, done. They were in Taylor's room. Taylor was over by the mirror, fussing over a change of clothes. The boy turned this way and that, looked over his shoulder, smoothing one of his mom's black dress down over his bum. "How do I look?" he asked, and not for the first time.

Daniel rolled his eyes. "You look great."

"You don't think my bum looks big in this?"

"Do girls really say that?" Taylor tugged the hem a little further down his thighs. "You look better in that dress that half the girls at school would."

Taylor grinned.

Daniel watched as his friend shimmied out of the dress, and stepped into another one, mid-length with a floral print. Even after all these visits, all the girly chats and time together, he didn't understand his friend. They talked, a lot, but never about anything very meaningful. Daniel never told him about his dad, or his mom, or the profound sadness he felt at all times, except when he was here, in these clothes, playing at being a girl. And Taylor never said anything about his own life or his parents, though he let slip the occasional hint: loud arguments behind closed doors, fights rippling through the extended family, cruel comments by unkind cousins.

And Taylor was popular, at school he hung out with other guys, played soccer, talked about hockey. At break, he sat in a privileged position on the benches reserved for grade nine. Daniel had even seen him holding hands with a popular girl, a cheerleader, and heard rumours she was his girlfriend. And yet. Here he was, now very seriously deciding between which colour lipstick to wear.

"The coral one," Daniel suggested.

"Girl, you *always* pick coral."

"Because it's you colour," he grinned. He stuck the tip of his tongue out between his teeth. "Babe."

Taylor laughed.

With a performatively indolent flick of the finger, Daniel flipped the page of his magazine. He glanced down. Under a headline in bright and bold letters—*Transform Your Style: 8 Ways to a New You*—there was a girl. She was sixteen, or maybe seventeen. She was beautiful. Long strawberry blonde hair tied back in a loose ponytail fell loosely over one shoulder. A light scattering of freckles across pale skin. Flared blue jeans, leg bottoms sparkling with embroidered swirls in rainbow colours. Loose-fitting, scooped-neck t-shirt, rings on her fingers,

bangles at the wrist, a slim watch—Daniel examined every detail—cute little earrings and a belt—he couldn’t quite make it out, but he liked it—no, he wanted one, just like it—no, he wanted everything she wore—in fact, he wanted to look just like her.

No. Daniel suddenly wasn’t breathing, and the slow rhythmic kick of his legs stilled. She was just so very, terribly pretty. It almost hurt to look at her, it made him feel sick. A hard lump formed in his stomach. She looked so confident, a little smile played across her lips. Her confidence made her pretty. Or was it being pretty that made her so confident? But this girl in the magazine in her cute clothes, she looked so very happy. He didn’t want to look like her. No, he didn’t *just* want to look like her. To look like her, it wasn’t enough. That girl, she looked happy: effortlessly happy, authentically happy, and Daniel wanted to be that happy, too, he wanted to be happy, just like her and—his mind juddered, like a car passing over a speed bump—

I want to be her, he thought.

And then: I want to be a girl. God, I want it so badly.

And then a final shudder: what if I already am one?

Daniel remembered to breath, a slow exhalation of air like a puncture in a bicycle tire. Looking up, and there was Taylor, still meticulously painting his lips, like a paint-by-numbers with slow sweeps of the brush, a coral pout, dabbing with tissue. They’d watched way too many tutorials off Youtube, low-res webcam videos of teenage girls sitting on their bedroom floors. Taylor was good, but Daniel was better, but then he’d practiced more, a mild source of resentment for Taylor, to be outdone like that.

“Tay?”

Taylor started. He’d tried to push girly nicknames, but it never really stuck. “Hm?” His friend glanced away from the mirror, brush poised at his lips.

“Do you—” Daniel’s mouth felt dry. “Do you feel like—”

Taylor tilted his head to one side. “What?”

Daniel felt his heart pound, a rushing in his ears. He opened his mouth. But nothing came out. What he wanted to say, it couldn’t be put out there, in the open, where it could become real. No, better to keep it inside, for just a little longer, where it could be cherished and made safe. And yet, this feeling rising inside of him, it couldn’t be completely contained, not tonight, the realization was too fresh and insistent and needed, wanted to be heard.

“If you—I mean, if you were a girl, if this wasn’t, you know, just pretend but, like, for real, and we actually were girls, on a Friday night, what would your name be?” And it seemed insane, that after so many nights together, they’d never asked this of each other.

“I’d be Taylor, of course,” he said, and giggled behind his hand. “I mean, that’s my name. It’s who I am.” Then, he shrugged, “But the name goes both ways, right?” His eyes, wide and curious, highlighted with eyeliner and mascara, shone bright, and a slow smile curved coral lips. “Why?” he asked. “Do *you* have a girl name?”

Biting his lower lip, Daniel nodded.

Taylor rushed to his side, took his hands. “Oh, you just *have* to tell me—please? What is it?”

“Amber,” she said.

Daniel sits in his dad’s car by the side of the road with his phone in his hand. A gentle snow has started to fall, fluttering and sparkling in the sun. At the other end of the phone line, his sister, and her voice calls out to him from across the Atlantic: “Daniel?” and again, “Bro, hey, speak to me.”

He hangs up.

For a time, he stares numbly at the phone in his hand. Eventually, he puts the phone down on the seat next to him, next to the discarded wig. He does this numbly, as though from a distance. In this same state, he starts up the Satnav and brings up the previous destination: The Lodge resort on the outskirts of Chippewa Bay. Then, he pops the car into drive and with a crunch of snow under the tires, begins to drive.

Amber, he thinks, it can’t be, like actually it’s impossible. There’s just no way that that the name I picked for myself as a child is the same name as Galen’s wife.

This thought rolls, dips and dives through his mind as he drives. Fortunately, the road is clear. The route is a simple one. It’s kind of embarrassing, that he crashed the car the way he did. If he’d just kept his shit together for a little longer—

He’s sitting at a red light where the country road rejoins the highway, waiting for it to change, when the phone rings. The light turns green and he accelerates through the intersection. Traffic is light as he crests a small hill and out in front of him in the distance he sees the small city of Chippewa Bay, nestled between forest on either side and snug against the flat white glare of the frozen lake.

Daniel picks up the phone.

“Don’t you fucking hang up on me.” The thousands of kilometres of distance between them does nothing to blunt the fear and anger in her voice. “Don’t you—”

“I remember, Kara,” Daniel says. “I remember. All of it, I think.”

The road snakes down towards the lake but the satnav directs him to turn right, a narrow single-lane road leading back into the woods framing the town. There is a large sign by the turn off: *The Lodge B&B*, ornate lettering carved into wood.

“Why did you hang up?” she asks.

“You knew, didn’t you?” Back under the canopy of trees, piled up snow glimmers with dappled thin daylight. “All along. What happened.” She doesn’t say anything. “It’s still a bit blurry, to be honest. I can remember going to Taylor’s. All those visits over those months we lived in Kitchener. When did you figure it out, what we were doing?”

Kara’s voice is guarded. “That was a long time ago, Dan.”

“When, Kara?”

She sighs. “Pretty early on. There were a lot of tells. You wore my stuff; remember *that*? I think you tried to be careful putting stuff back, but I could tell, a girl always can, you know. Bras out of place, a skirt hung up the wrong way around. That kind of thing. One day when I got home

before you, I checked out your room. I figured, hey, the little pervert doesn't mind rooting through my shit, let's return the favour. I'll say, you hid it well. But I found your little girl box tucked behind the oil tank."

The memory slots into place. Yes, that's right, that's where he hid it; and when he dressed in his own stuff, it always stank vaguely of petrochemicals. It's not like he ever had a lot of money, as a kid. But he remembers, with a vague simmer of shame, visits to the Goodwill shop, or Salvation Army, shoulders hunched as he walked past the rows of skirts and blouses and dresses, at least three times before summoning the courage to grab something off the rack and, red-faced, drop it before an uncaring teenage cashier. Half the time, it didn't fit. He remembers the sinking disappointment of that with startling clarity. Usually, he gave them to Taylor and in return, Taylor gave him his finds that he grew tired of.

"And makeup, too. I found the stuff in your box. But there were signs, you know, a dusting of powder left in the bathroom, once I found a tube of lipstick, and I knew it wasn't mine, you just left it lying out. Also, a couple of time, you weren't careful enough, cleaning your face I mean, I saw flecks left in the corner of your mouth, on your lashes, shit like that."

And he remembers this too. The terrible anxiety when he couldn't find that tube of lipstick. Paranoia, when she got home and he caught her looking at him with open curiosity, the hot flush up his neck as she evaluated him like some bug, pinned and on display, and he thought, *she knows*.

A few weeks after that first visit to Taylor's, he bought a makeup starter kit from Shoppers' Drug Mart. Practicing after school, house empty and a young boy standing at a mirror, alone and finding some strange solace in the act of painting his lips and hesitantly applying colour to his eyelids. The comforting sweep of a brush across his cheeks. After a day of awkward solitude at lunch and break, uncomfortable in the change rooms before gym, invisibly lurking at the periphery of other lives. And then to come home and there's nothing there, too, silence and more loneliness. A regular in the school library, but a person can only read so many books. But then, a new hobby: and in the soft sweep of the applicator across his eyelids, the dabbing of colour to his lips, repetitive simple motions, there was peace. More than that, a sense of progress—getting better—and with it the gentle effacement of the boy that didn't fit in; yes—he remembers—being eleven and learning to put on makeup and the tentative, shy smile in the mirror, the tickle of joy at what he saw, the twisting shame of its wrongness. And always, the long scalding shower afterwards, scrubbing at eyes and cheeks and lips until, raw and red, his skin stung, but nobody could know, of course, especially his sister, his father, no, Dad could never know, God, can you even imagine?

But she'd known, of course she had. "So, you knew."

Her breath, hissed out between teeth. "Yeah."

"But you never said anything."

"After—that night, you know, I didn't want to—"

"Want to what, sis?"

Silence.

"Kara?"

Still, nothing.

“Amber?” Tyler said. He said it a few times, drawing it out, purring the final syllable. “I like it,” he said, nodding. “It very pretty.” And each time he said it, Amber felt a little jolt of pleasure, like a tingle up the spine, so that by the end, she was smiling, uncontrollably. Yes—she; I’m a girl, she trilled to herself, and though she wasn’t ready to say this out loud, inside she knew it to be true. I’m a girl! she wanted to shout, but also to hold her friend close in a tight embrace and whisper: I’m a girl. Instead, she just nodded, filled to bursting with effervescence, giddy little bubbles of joy rising, popping, bringing a smile so genuine it almost hurt.

“It doesn’t seem fair!” Taylor pouted. “That you’ve got such a pretty name now, and mine’s still just plain, ordinary Taylor.”

She giggled and then pulled him close, into a hug. He let out a little bark of surprise and went rigid in her embrace. “There’s nothing plain and ordinary about you,” she said and then, in a softer voice, she added, “thank you, Taylor.”

Slowly, he relaxed. They stayed like that for some time until finally, and gently, he took Amber by the shoulders and pushed her back. “Wow,” he said, his voice husky with emotion.

“Wow,” repeated Amber.

“So...” and for the first time Amber could recall, her friend seemed to flounder for words. He didn’t know what to do, and she wondered if some subtle shift in the relationship between them had taken place. Always, he’d taken the lead in their feminine play. Now, it felt as if in taking a name for herself, she’d taken a step further than he’d ever dared. Now, she imagined there was something different in the way Taylor looked at her. With wonder, certainly. But something speculative too, an appraising glint in the eye that made her uncomfortable, that reminded her of the way Taylor looked at his cheerleader girlfriend.

“So!” She held his hand. “What’s next?”

“Hmm, well.” He made a performance of it, but she knew he’d been planning all week, and her sudden cataclysmic realization was hardly going to derail the night. He held a finger to his chin as if in thought. “What’s the single biggest, most important night for any girl?”

“Her wedding?”

“No, silly!” Then, he laughed. “Well, okay, maybe. But before that?”

Amber shrugged.

“The prom, of course!”

Amber felt pink rise in her cheeks, and a little thrill raced down her spine. Yes. Of course the prom. Even Kara, in these final months of school, seemed swept up by the excitement as grade twelves prepared for their graduation, and advertisement ran on the big tv screen over the school lobby. There were photos of gorgeous girls in gowns the colour of gemstones, and also boys, in tuxedos the colour of bruises. Even in grade seven, it was impossible not to feel the excitement of the event, the promise of a glamorous, unforgettable night.

“All girls dream of their prom night!” Taylor added. “Haven’t you?”

“No,” Amber said and then immediately after, “yes!” No, because until tonight, the future never seemed to extend beyond the day, week, maybe a month. She had never considered the prom because it was years distant and she had no vision of a future with her in it. She hadn’t pictured herself in a tuxedo let alone a beautiful, glittering dress. But as if summoned by Taylor’s enthusiasm, now she saw it. And so, ‘yes’, because—God, yes, she wanted that future, even if it was completely and totally impossible. But even just that word, prom, it now brought to her a vision, hazy and unclear but something involving long hair, piled high, heels and a dress, standing with someone at her side, an arm around her waist and string lights glimmering behind them in the dark.

Taylor laughed. “Which is it?”

“Yes!—please, yes.”

They started online for inspiration, flicked through a bunch of shops, finally settling on scrolling through Tumblr. “Can you imagine?” Taylor said, and clicked on a picture of a tall, thin blonde in a flowing blue dress. “God, I’m so jealous. It must be so much fun.” Another picture, four girls in a row, arms around each other’s waist, the colour so bright, those dressed, the happy smiles. “Shopping with your friends, and trying on dresses, and then the salon that morning, and, you know, being pampered all day, and a manicure and makeup and hair, a whole day that’s just about you, celebrating—well, being a girl, don’t you think, before graduating and becoming an adult and boring.”

Amber nodded, mouth dry, stricken silent. They were so beautiful, these girls, and he saw the way they clung to each other and felt an indescribable yearning, so profound he felt like crying.

Taylor gave her a nudge. “Let’s do it.”

First, the dresses, chosen from Taylor’s mom’s closet. He chose a red gown, swirling in silk waves to the floor, slit to mid-thigh with a halter neck and sparkling sequins. Meanwhile, Daniel’s was a black, strapless mermaid dress, tight across the thighs to the knees before flaring out in sparkling ruffled layers. Her stomach fluttered as he stepped into it. She glanced over at Taylor and saw him doing the same. No—her; it was easier to think they were just two girls, besties getting ready for their prom. Before starting, Taylor poured out two small glasses of Ginger Ale, spiked with Canadian Club he’d snuck from his parents’ liquor cabinet. It was Amber’s first time drinking alcohol. She pursed her lips around the straw,. She didn’t like Ginger Ale. But when he pulled away, the tip of his straw was ruby red with lipstick, and that made her smile.

They helped each other, giggling and zipping each other into their dresses. They jostled for space at the mirror and redid their makeup, offering advice, snarky comments, passing the mascara back and forth, grinning, laughing, falling away from the mirror in giggles, I can’t believe we’re—get back here—oh my God, look at us! Until, finally, two girls stood at the mirror side by side, arms around each other’s waist, and Amber’s heart was so full of joy she thought it might burst, knowing that this was as good as it gets, that there’d be no real prom for her but that maybe, just maybe, this was close enough.

“Pictures!” Taylor said, turning to get his camera. “We need photos.”

His dad stood in the doorway, arms folded over his chest.

He parks the car out front of the Lodge, in one of the bays out front of the main building, a picturesque, two-story log building on a rocky outcropping, looking over lake Nipissing. There's another car, a rental, and a battered Ford truck. From what he remembers of the website, there's a fancy restaurant in the Lodge, a small shop, and a few rooms. But the main attraction are the private cabins dotted around the site, each in its own secluded glade at the end of winding forest paths. There should be a little safe box by the door of his cabin containing the keys. No need to talk to anyone. Good. Because Daniel doesn't really feel like explaining to anyone why he's wearing a dress and stockings and carrying a cute little purse.

"I never heard that part," Kara says.

"Yeah. I blocked it out. I was just a kid, Kara. So was Taylor. We were just fucking around," he says, though he knows that isn't true. Maybe for Taylor, but not for him. What he felt as a child has returned to him in its fullness, with all its youthful honesty and truth. Peace, happiness, and pleasure, feminine ideation manifest in this newly self-fashioned self. But Amber died before she could blossom, withering under the scornful gaze of Taylor's father.

And I've been mourning her my whole life, Daniel realizes, fuck. That brief, incandescent moment of joy, like a burst of sunshine, experienced in the sound of a name, the sight of myself in the mirror. Has she haunted my dreams, he wonders. Forever glimpsed in passing, seen in that girl across the restaurant or passing through the office, a moment lost standing in the storefront mirror staring at the mannequin in its dress, without quite knowing why.

"Taylor's dad called ours," he continues. "Waiting for him to show, it was horrible, Kara, just fucking horrible. Like, a second before, we'd been having all this fun, you know? And we'd bought into the illusion, looked at ourselves in the mirror and saw what we wanted to see, and there wasn't any shame or humiliation, it wasn't perverted or anything, it was just fun, it was so much fun, Kara. I was happy. But then, with his dad there—" He cuts off, feels an echo of the humiliation. Suddenly, they weren't two glamorous girls primping before their prom. No, they were just two failed boys in ill-fitting dresses in bras stuffed full of tissues, wearing too much makeup, prancing around like fucking pansies.

I'm sorry, Ted, his dad mumbled, when he came to collect—not Amber—Daniel, and the girl he felt himself to be died, then and there. Just keep your fucking faggot kid away from mine, Taylor's father said. And Daniel remembers a brief hope that his father would stand up for him and say something. But, no. Grey-faced and too tired, his father roughly grabbed him by the arm and dragged him out into the street, still in the dress, and away from the big house, back down the hill. People on the street stopped and stared. Daniel cried the whole way.

"I'm sorry," Kara says.

"Yeah." Daniel hunches deep in his seat. "Me too."

"I remember when you got home. I was watching from my bedroom window, saw you coming down the hill. Then Dad dragging you upstairs. How silent he was. He saw me, told me to take a good look. You couldn't meet my eyes and stood there, staring at the floor. Then Dad told me to go to my room. I didn't argue. But I stayed at the door and listened. At first, I couldn't hear anything, his voice was too quiet. Maybe you answered something, I don't know. But after that, he shouted, he screamed. And then—well. I guess you remember that, too, now."

“Yeah,” Daniel says. “I remember that, too.”

“But you know, like I said, I saw you. From my window, the two of you coming up the drive.” He hears the hesitation in her voice. “And when he told me to look at you. And for what it’s worth? Daniel, I thought you looked pretty cute.”

“For what it’s worth,” he says.

“And that was that,” she says. “But why’s this all come back now?”

But he’s not ready to move the conversation on. “But that wasn’t the end of it, Kara,” Daniel says. “Why would you say that’s it?”

Silence, and then she says, “what happened next, it was an accident.”

You stupid, goddamn—do you have any idea?—that man, you have any idea what he’s done for us? He’s the reason I’ve found work, he knows people—one word, and I’m out of a job, do you understand? And this whole time, you’ve been—what?—what the fuck do you think you’re doing—what kind of—Jesus, look at you—no, I mean it, get over her, you goddamn—look at yourself, I said *look at yourself* you fucking—you look—christ, you look like—her.

Tears stream down his cheeks, now as they did then, and he hears the echo of what he said to him: sorry, Dad, I’m so sorry—

And when his Dad hit him, he made no effort to defend himself. It was a single clumsy punch, and it caught him in the shoulder. He stumbled in heels, still in that gorgeous black dress, so tight around the knees and thighs. His arms, suddenly pinwheeling at the top of the stairs. His dad’s eyes went wide with horror and the realisation of what he’d done, but he didn’t reach out and made no effort to catch him. Daniel twisted, felt pain flare in his ankle, grabbed at the banister, the wall, and caught nothing but air. He fell, shoulder hitting the stairs with a sickening crunch. Tumbling over, crashing to the bottom of the stairs. His head bounced off the edge of the final step. Pain, and darkness.

He woke up, much later, bruised and battered in the hospital, with a broken arm and dislocated shoulder, twisted ankle and a dressing over his right temple, and no memory of crossdressing, of Amber, of his Dad hitting him.

“You’re lying,” Kara says. “Why would you lie about that? Dad was a fucking loser, but he never hit us, he was never abusive. You’re remembering wrong.”

Daniel takes a shuddering breath. “He hit me,” Daniel says. This is true, he realizes. “Dad hit me and let me fall down the stairs.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Kara says. She hangs up.

He stares at his phone for some time, waiting for it to ring again. When it doesn’t, he sighs, slips it back into his purse. It’s cold in the car now. And he’s exhausted. His head hurts, but it’s a different sort of hurt, the more familiar tension of tiredness and stress. It’s nearly noon and the sun shines brightly off the snow. He passes the back of his hand across his face. When he checks in the mirror, his makeup has smeared and run. Picking up his phone, he retrieves the map of the Lodge from the website, and traces out the path to his cabin. He doesn’t see anyone about. It’s as good a time to step out in public. It’s not like it’s the first time I’ve worn a dress in public, I guess, he thinks ruefully.

The low heels on his borrowed shoes are totally inappropriate for the snow. His feet are instantly cold and wet as he steps out of the car. He shivers, wraps his arms around his torso. The purse bounces against his hips. He scurries along the path as quickly as he can in those shoes. A sudden cold wind flutters his dress and bites at his bum. He's reminded of the ridiculousness of what he wears, corset and suspenders and stockings on a cold winter's day. But it's not very far. There really isn't time to appreciate the beauty of the forested path, or the cabin itself. Instead, shivering violently, he finds the keybox affixed to the porch, and with numb fingers spins the combination lock. The box swings open. There is a single metal key, which he takes.

Really feeling the cold now, he climbs the few wooden steps up to the front porch. Thankfully, the entrance has been swept clean of snow. He slips the key into the lock. It turns easily. Despite the chill, he takes a moment to look back over his shoulder. Daniel sees the path he carved through the snow, the sweeping pattern of the dress and the twin troughs of his footfall. But there's no one there, between the trees; he doesn't think anybody saw him. Thank fuck for that, at least. He pulls the door open, passes through, pulls it shut behind him. He leans back against the door with a palpable sense of relief and exhaustion.

There's a woman sat next to a gas fireplace at the far end of the cabin. She takes one long, hard look at him, and smiles.

"It's about fucking time," Chloe says.

Chapter Nine

"If I'd known you were into this kind of shit," Choe says, "I'd have—" and then trails off.

Daniel's first instinct is one of profound humiliation. He wants to hide, wishes the ground would just open, then and there, and swallow him up, utterly. Shame shudders through him, then disappears almost instantly and in its wake leaves a feeling of utter exhaustion. Truth is, he's just too tired to care.

Kneeling, he fumbles with his shoes. His fingers are still red with cold. It takes some effort. He can feel Chloe watching him from over by the fire. This is what he wants now, more than anything: the warmth of a fire, the comfort of a seat. Maybe a glass of wine and then, a good long sleep, the kind of sleep that never ends. Oh, and also to finally get out of this fucking corset, yeah, wouldn't that be nice, it's pinching something awful.

Kicking off the shoes, Daniel stands stiffly. It's only been about an hour, but it feels good to get out of those heels, already he feels the strain in his lower back. He brushes down the dress, tweaks it into place. Chloe raises an eyebrow but says nothing. Wooden floor beams gleam with varnish, slippery under his stockinged feet. The cabin at the Lodge is small and cozy. The main room contains a sofa and two large chairs by a gas fireplace, and at the far end an expansive window looks across the lake. The lake is white with snow and ice and bright with the sunlight of early afternoon.

Daniel sinks into the seat, posture less relaxed than he'd like, with legs crossed at the knee. The dress rides high on his thigh, exposing the lacy top of one stocking and the metal suspender clip tab holding it firmly in place. He can see that Chloe sees it. He tugs the dress back over his leg and folds his hands on his knees. "What are you doing here, Chloe?"

"I was worried," she says. "When you didn't show, the Lodge gave me a call. They wanted to know if we were still coming, if everything was still okay what with the storm and everything. I tried calling you. But you didn't pick up."

She waits, expectantly. He says nothing.

Her cheeks puff with exasperation. "I was worried, okay? I thought you'd been in an accident. Like, what the fuck, Daniel? What happened, where've you been?"

And he's tired, just so goddam tired he could fall asleep right there, in that chair, by the cozy warmth of the fireplace. "What do you care?" he says, staring past her into the empty whiteness of the lake. "Like actually, do you even give a shit?"

"I'm here, aren't I?" she snaps back. "I rented a fucking car, you have any idea how much that costs at Christmas? Drove all the way here, and—"

"How does your new boyfriend feel about all this?" he says. "Or did you already fuck that up, too?" Daniel pictures it clearly, again: Chloe, in a sparkling black dress, berry-red cocktail in hand, another man's arm around her waist, hand resting with painful familiarity over her hip. Tall, well-muscled arms, tight white Ralph Lauren button-down shirt. Ron, that's right, twenty-seven-year-old property developer from Milton, Ontario. Cocky grin, goatee. Daniel spent entirely too much time scrolling through the man's profile. "Ron kick you out?"

There's a flash of anger in her eyes. She opens her mouth to answer, visibly deflates, then laughs. "Yeah. Okay, yeah, I deserve that. That guy, fuck, what an asshole. Turns out, he

already had a girlfriend, she was meant to be away for a couple of weeks with her family. Obviously, I didn't know any of this. I settled in for the holiday, then that bitch, she just showed up Saturday morning. Wanted to surprise him. He was in the shower, and I opened the door and there she was, long coat and fuck-me heel and nothing but lingerie beneath. Like, super sexy, but she surprised the fuck out of me, let me tell you; and me, her. Seriously bad scene, that chick just fucking flipped out." Turning her head slightly, she indicates her left cheek. "Bitch nearly scratched my face off," and he sees the parallel lines, faintly visible despite concealer, running from just beneath her left ear down to chin.

"How sad for you, Chloe, I really feel for you."

"You should've seen her, Daniel, hair flailing about, reaching for me with these bright red talons." Gently tracing her cheek, Chloe grins. "That bitch was way too cool for that dickhead. We both were."

Daniel grunts.

Chloe sighs. "I was genuinely worried about you, you know."

A sharp retort rises to his lips. Where was the concern two weeks ago, he wants to say, or two months ago? Yawning, he feels sleep tug at his eyes. The sound of his sister's voice: what the fuck is wrong with you? He waves his hand in an ambiguous gesture of 'whatever': "Sure."

Chloe leans forward, elbows on knees. She's wearing blue jeans and a well-worn black turtleneck under a slate-grey sweater. The turtleneck's a favourite of hers. He bought it for her years ago at a little boutique shop on Young Street. With her head cocked slightly to one side, bangs hanging straight over one eye, she looks him over. Sunlight from behind picks out red highlights in her hair. A small smile tugs at the corner of her lips, and curiosity fills her eyes.

"Take a picture," he says. "It'll last longer."

"Don't tempt me," she says. "So...", and she draws it out, leaning a little closer. "You want to tell me what all this is?" She waves a hand to indicate what 'this' is, the brown dress, stockings, the breasts pushing out his front. "Where'd you keep this stuff hidden?"

"I didn't," he snaps back.

"Sure, whatever. For what it's worth, it's a very pretty dress. It suits you."

"It's not mine."

Her eyes widen slightly. "You stole it?"

Daniel groans. "This isn't—" and he's about to say, what it looks like. But what *does* it look like? Her ex-boyfriend walks in after an unexplained absence of several days, wearing a dress, wearing makeup—gently, he rests his fingertips against his lips and realises, yes, the lipstick hasn't worn off—and heels, what's she meant to think? "Or fine, maybe it is, okay, exactly what it looks like, I don't fucking know. You tell me, Chloe. What do you think you're seeing here?"

She smiles, very slightly, and her eyes brighten, in a way that excites him. Despite his exhaustion, he feels his cock twitch, and suddenly he breathes a little faster. Chloe leans forward. "I think," she begins, and pauses. She taps her finger against her chin. "No."

“No?”

“I was going to say, I think you came down here to ‘find yourself,’ or some shit like that. But, no. Like sure, maybe that was the plan when you left Toronto, but something happened, right? That dress, it isn’t some goodwill rag you picked up on the way. Those stockings? What are those, Welford? Falke? Not cheap. And from the way you’re sitting there, I can tell you’re wearing some serious support under that dress, a corset or something. And maybe, just maybe, you had all that stuff before and kept it hidden from me. But I don’t think so, I believe you when you say didn’t. So, I don’t think you’re some secret cross-dresser that’s kept it secret from me. Although, I’ll be honest, it’d explain a lot.”

He opens his mouth to protest, and the words dies unspoken.

“What?” Chloe asks.

But he shakes his head. He’s not ready to confront the idea that if he *isn’t* some secret crossdresser, as she put it, then he’s something else entirely, possibly not even a ‘he’ at all, and that’s just too crazy and impossible. Daniel feels a glimmer of childhood surety experienced standing in front of a mirror wearing a beautiful prom dress, arm-in-arm with a friend, giggling. But that was long ago, and the memory lacks clarity, like a tree seen through a curtain of swirling snow, vague and shifting.

Instead, he says, “It’s been a weird couple of days,” and laughs at the dry understatement. He pats himself down, as though needing physical confirmation through the tactile sensation of the dress and the corset beneath. Then, he passes his hand across his face. “I’m not well, Chloe.”

Chloe raises an eyebrow. She leans back in the chair, crosses her legs at the knee and he wonders if she’s consciously mirroring him, they’re both sat the same way, now, though he’s the one in the dress.

“Want to talk about it?”

“Yeah,” Daniel answers, “I think I do.”

“Good.” There’s a bottle of wine sitting on the table between them. Did she bring it? Or was it a gift from the Lodge? Either way, she cracks opens the bottle, pours out a glass for herself, and when he nods, another for him. It’s only early afternoon, and it feels like a lifetime ago that he sat down and ate a small bowl of porridge. But he’s not hungry. It might be the corset, compressing his stomach. Or maybe it’s something else.

They each take a silent, serious sip from their glass.

“So, Friday morning,” he begins, and pauses, and it hits him then, really hits how much has changed in so little time. He’s always believed that life isn’t like that, it’s not all big epiphanies and life-altering events. No, change comes in the slow accumulation of a thousand little moments. Day-to-day, the gradual evolution of familiar patterns into something new and meaningful. But this view is impossible to align with these past few days, from the angry drive out of Toronto, through the snowstorm, to crashing the car on a backroad leading into Chippewa Bay. Waking up in Amber’s bed in Galen’s cabin in the woods. He tells her all this and then, lightly touching his forehead, he explains his injury and its pain. How he could ease the pain by submitting to a compulsion to wear women’s clothing.

Daniel expects her to laugh, or to smirk, he waits for the hand, held in front of her mouth to hide the inevitable mocking smile, or the look, the one that tells him she no longer sees him as a man, but as some kind of sissy, a wimp, a failure. Anticipation keeps him on edge. He feels his voice rise into an unpleasant pitch and his fingers curl into his dress, and he's ready to lash out at her. He expects ridicule and contempt. But Chloe gives him neither. Instead, she listens carefully and her face remains studiously impassive. Gradually, he relaxes into his story.

Her interruptions are few: "What did they look like?" she asks, when he reaches the part where he pulls on Amber's panties for the first time. He frowns, thinking she's laughing at him. How could she not not? Yet as she asks the question, she lightly touches her earring, rakes her fingertips through her hair, the gesture achingly comfortable from so many conversations over the years. She asks out of genuine curiosity, and there's no malice in her look.

"Blue," he says, and pauses to think. "Lilac, actually. Um, a kind of mesh fabric, and there were all these little gemstones—diamantes? I think they're called?—in a butterfly pattern, and—" a smile creeps across his lips, "and they were super cute, and comfy, too, once I got used to them."

Another time, she interrupts to ask: Yeah, so this guy, Galen? What's he look like? And soon after she asks, That lipstick you put on, what colour was it? And he answers: he's a big guy, honestly he's massive, and tall, and it's not fat, the guy's in great shape. Good looking too, like, really good looking. The lipstick? It was pink—a very pale pink—I can't remember the name, to be honest, and it felt weird on the lips, at first, until it didn't.

He doesn't tell her about the letters. But he begins to tell her about the night he went downstairs for a drink of water and heard the man groan in his bedroom. He hesitates. Chloe picks up on his nervousness, tilts her head to one side. "What's wrong?"

"I—" Daniel grimaces, reaches for his wine. A large gulp on an empty stomach does nothing to qualm his nervousness. Instead, he just feels queasy, on top of very tired, and suddenly feels as though he needs to throw up. He gives his head a shake. "I don't know if I should tell you the next part," he says.

"Why?"

"Because," and he chews his bottom lip, "I don't know what it means for us."

For a moment, they sit there in silence. Finally, she gives a curt nod, stands and walks away, over towards the large windows. He watches her walk away. Silhouetted by the sun, he admires the shape of her. His cock twitches again, at the thought of her, at the memory of her nakedness. He has to fight the urge to reach up under the dress and adjust himself, the panties too tight and uncomfortable, fuck, he's too tired to be turned on, yet he can't help himself, he loves the way the light picks out the red in her hair, the curve of her hip. For a moment she stares out across the lake, and he stares at her, legs crossed at the thighs to hide his hardon.

When she turns back to him, the sun is directly behind and he can't quite make out her face. "Us?" she says. "After the things you said?"

He doesn't really remember. A red haze descended when he confronted her. Slut. Cunt. The details aren't there, but he knows the things he said, you can't unsay. Get the fuck out, you bitch. What he does remember, with painful vividness, is the palpable sense of betrayal and

humiliation at the discovery of her infidelity, magnified by her brutal honesty when he showed her the pictures.

“You cheated on me,” he says, hurt, voice straining against the sudden emotion he feels rising.

“And you lied to me.”

“You didn’t know that. You didn’t know about work.”

“That’s not what I mean.” She walks back to him. He can see now that her cheeks are wet with tears, gleaming in the soft light of the cabin. She looks down at him with a look of pity and anguish and anger, and his stomach twists painfully to see her like this. “You’ve lied to me for much longer than that.”

“No,” he says, shaking his head. “No.”

She wipes the back of her hand across her face. Settling back into the chair opposite him, she reaches across the space between them and takes his hands between hers. “Daniel,” she says. “This is the longest conversation we’ve had in nearly a year.”

“I’ve been—busy, with work, and you—you were—”

“Yes. But even so. When we *did* talk? You were so distant, Daniel. Like you were barely in the room. I get you were tired. But everything you said sounded tired, too, like you ‘d stopped caring about everything, including me.” She smiles weakly. “Listening to the way you described those panties, that man, the lipstick you wore? It’s the most enthusiasm I’ve heard out of you in a year.”

She lets that sink in. It can’t be true. The breakup, it was her fault. She cheated on him. That’s a fact. She even posted it online. Ron, his arm around her waist with intimate familiarity. More than that, obviously. He fucked her, fucked his girlfriend. And when he found out, oh, how his imagination tortured him, those vivid images seared into his brain—

Chloe on her back, knees raised high and legs spread, her beautiful cunt glistening with wet arousal and the shadowy figure of some man rising above her—and Chloe, on all fours, gorgeous breasts and pink nipples swollen with excitement, glancing back over her shoulder, hair messy with sweat and face contorted in a rictus of ecstasy, and again the shadowy figure of some man, thrusting deep into her—or Chloe, on her knees, skin sweat-slick and shiny, smiling wickedly, reaching up, glossy-tipped fingers curling around an erect cock, tip purpled and bobbing as she leaned forward, lips open, ready and shimmering with gloss—

—except this erotic ideation, which once filled him with rage and sadness and impotent betrayal, warps and wavers until those feelings are directed inwards and not solely outwards, at her. Because as much as he yearns to be the shadowy figure that fucks his girlfriend senseless, he now wonders—but no, this is nothing new, he’s always done this—he wonders what it’s like to be the one fucked senseless, the one on all fours, or kneeling, smiling around a cock in the mouth, or groaning for the one buried deep.

She touches his knee. “Even sex, Dan. And there hasn’t been much of that, you haven’t—”

“That’s not fair,” he interrupts. “Whenever I tried—”

“I felt like there was something wrong with me—”

“Made me feel—”

“And when we did,” she says, raising her voice over his, “let’s be honest, Dan, it wasn’t very good. Once, maybe. At first, yeah, it was good between us. But his last year, longer even?”

He doesn’t answer. Chloe draws her hand across her face, poking bangs back behind her ear and the gesture is so familiar he has to suppress the desire to reach out, too, and brush fingertips across her forehead. Her version doesn’t align with his but also isn’t wrong. They were both drunk, the last time they had sex. He barely got hard enough to enter her. It wasn’t just the booze, either. After a few minutes of rhythmless, fruitless rutting, she shoved him off. His limp cock slipped free, the condom shrivelled and sticky. She wiped up in the bathroom, he pulled on his boxers. Then, with the lights out they lay back-to-back in bed. Neither said anything. He wanted to. His chest hurt, his throat was tight. The sound of her breathing eventually deepened into sleep. After some time, he slipped quietly out of the bed and went to the kitchen. He poured himself a glass of cold water and drank it down. Then, he went out on their balcony. The distant sounds of Vaughan reached him, underside of clouds glowing with city lights. The night air was cold. Their condo balcony was eight stories up, looking over a cobblestone path between residential buildings, lined with solar lamps and hydrangeas. How easy, he remembers thinking, to just—jump. What must it feel like, to fall like that, through the cold night air? Terrifying, obviously. And brief. And yet there must be within that downward hurtle an instance in which, having given up all control his life would truly be his own. This instant would be fleeting and yet more real than anything he had ever known. Daniel gripped the railing and breathed deeply. He pictured lifting his leg over the railing. Standing, now on the other side. Leaning forward, suspended, over the concrete below. He squeezed his eyes shut and turned his face upwards. A scream shivered his throat. Swallowing it down, he instead hung his head, shook his head and laughed sardonically at his own melodrama. Returned to the living room. Slept on the sofa.

“I shouldn’t have done it,” Chloe says. “I accept that. Cheating on you, I mean. But—it felt—like you were cheating on *me*, I don’t know, somewhere in your head. Even when you were inside me, Dan. You felt distant, like you weren’t really there. As if I wasn’t *enough* somehow. Can you imagine what that feels like, how it hurts? To be that close to someone, to have them *inside* of you, yet feel ignored?”

He looks at her, silhouetted by the darkening sky behind and lit by the soft glow of the fireplace. She’s so beautiful, he thinks, and he feels a terribly upswelling of emotion—of love, maybe—like he hasn’t felt in a very long time and wants nothing more than to take her into his arms and hold her close. Tears dot his eyes. At the same time, he still resents her. He grips his dress tightly. He feels hot, and his breathing laboured, he tries to draw in a deep, calming breath but finds this impossible in the corset. There’s a moment of panic—I can’t breathe!—and he exhales loudly and blurts out: “I gave him a hand job.”

Chloe blinks. “Excuse me?”

Still struggling to breathe properly, Dan explains. “Last night.” He shakes his head. “Fuck. It was only last night. I went downstairs. To grab a glass of water. I heard these... noises. From his room. So I went to check. And he was in bed, sort of calling out, bad dreams or something, he never said.” Daniel takes a shuddering breath, releases, and feels calmer now. “I think something to do with his time in the military, he sort of hinted he saw some pretty bad stuff. Anyway. I went into his room to—I don’t know—calm him down, I was worried he was

going to hurt himself. And at the time, I was wearing this long nightdress, a sort of negligee-type thing, green and silky. And he suddenly bolted upright and grabbed me. He held me in his arms and clearly thought I was his ex-wife, that I was Amber. And—he got excited—his, you know, he had an erection and it was jabbing into me hard and I didn't know what to do and when I, um, pushed it away he, uh, seemed to like it and..." His cheeks burn and he can't meet her eyes. He stares down at the table between them and into the depths of his wine, sparkling with firelight. "I wrapped his cock in the hem of the dress and just sort of worked it up and down, like this," and he mimes holding a thick rod in the palm of his hand, sliding the circle of finger and thumbs up and down, "and it didn't take long, it really didn't, and then he let go of me."

Now, shyly, he looks up at Chloe. She's leaning forward slightly, and her eyes are bright, her cheeks lightly flushed. Again, he expects shock or shame or laughter, and she *is* smiling, but there's nothing nasty in it, rather, she bites her lower lip and seems eager to hear more. "And then?"

"He just fell right back to sleep. Like, almost instantly. And... and—and that was it."

"How did you feel?"

"I felt—" ashamed, he nearly says, but pauses, digging for a more honest answer. "Shocked, obviously. I couldn't believe what I'd just done. Um. Unmanly—maybe inadequate is a better word, he just seemed like so much more of a man than me. And, uh, better endowed, like, I've never seen a cock that big." He blushes. "And—it was just so gross, the stuff the dress absorbed, when it touched my thigh afterwards, it was sticky and cold. And my hand. I had, uh, his—you know, semen, on my hand, too. When he came there was, ah, a lot, and—that felt weird, having a man's come on my hand."

"Did you taste it?"

"What? No!"

"What about your own?"

"No!" He mimes gagging. "Of course not."

"Why not?" She shrugs. "It's honestly not that bad."

He shakes his head vehemently. "I'm not—"

"What, gay?"

Mouth open in protest, the words die in his throat.

"I can remember," Chloe says, "the first time I gave a boy a hand job. I was eighteen, at the prom. James Bouchard, my date, we'd been going steady for about three months, and he was just so desperate. And honestly, so was I, just super horny, and I think we both knew this was it, we'd be going separate ways after this. He was heading to UBC and I'd been accepted at U of T. We'd talked about long distance dating. But we both knew it wasn't going to happen. So there we were, back seat of his parents' Sunfire and we're making out, with his hands on my tits—"

"What were you wearing?" Daniel interrupts.

“Oh, this sexy sky-blue number, slinky with all sorts of sequins, slit up to here, backless, with a halter top, he’d undone it from around my neck, but I still had my bra and—well, it was getting pretty steamy in the back of the car, let me tell you. I sat in his lap with my arms around his neck. I’d kissed a boy before but never gone this far. It felt pretty fucking fantastic, and when he touched me, through my panties—wow.” She smiles, wistfully. “Like, I’d masturbated before but that was the first time a boy got me off. Nothing earthshattering but...” she trails off. “It was nice, really nice, I came two or three times, just these little ones, like small fireworks, sparks of pleasure in my tummy. I cried, actually. He asked me if I was okay. I couldn’t answer, I didn’t even know what I was feeling right then, but I also knew I wanted him to feel as good as I was. I think he’d been hoping for something more, a blow job at least, but yeah, I wasn’t ready for that. Still. He wasn’t exactly complaining when I pulled his cock out of his trousers. Guys, eh? Just like you, it didn’t take long. And yeah, it was pretty gross. Nearly got it all over my dress, can you imagine? Most of it ended up on his belly.”

Daniel groans. A bulge tents his dress. He can’t remember the last time he was this turned on, hearing her talk about jerking off some guy. “How did you feel?”

“Good,” she says. “I mean, like you, I thought it was kind of gross. Like, I knew what to expect, right? Girls talk. I’d seen porn. But the reality was just a lot... stickier?” She laughs. “And he was funny, the little sounds he made, like ‘ah,’ ‘ah,’ ‘ah,’ and ‘ung’”—she pulls a face—“and then he was done. And yeah, it felt good to make *him* feel good. Proud’s too strong a word. More like—validated.” She frowned. “No, I don’t like that, it’s not like my self-worth was tied to pleasing some boy. Although,” and she shrugs, “I dunno, maybe for eighteen-year-old me, it was. Getting him off like that, I felt all gooey and warm inside, afterwards.”

“Warm,” Daniel says. Closing his eyes, he thinks back to last night and sees clearly, his hand outline by the thin layer of satin, wrapped around the other man’s penis. Marvelling at his own action, the rhythmic pumping—the hot tensing beneath his touch—and then, yes—a flash of pleasure, marvelling even at what he’s done, quickly suppressed because he knew it was wrong to feel this way. “Yeah,” he admits. “I felt that, too. I enjoyed getting him off.” He closes his eyes, feels the sense memory of the heat and firmness of the other man under his palm. “And knowing I could make him feel good that way, and...” He rubs at the back of his neck, sighs. “Like he deserved it, if that makes sense? After quite literally saving my life, taking me in, taking care of me. He’s a good guy, Chloe, he really is, and there he was, in pain and... lonely, and I could make all that better, all it took was....”

And afterwards, he rushed back to his room, as quickly as he could, to wash his hands and dispose of the evidence. But had there been a moment, standing over the sink, where he held his hand up and saw how the other man’s come gleamed in the pale moonlight? Had he not been tempted, ever so briefly, to let his tongue dart out and taste it?

“Did you” he asks. “Taste it, after?”

She laughs, softly. “I deserve that. At the time, no. Later that night, yeah. After a couple of Fireball shots, remember that shit?” She pulls a face, mock gags. “Anyway, we went back to the car, made out a bunch more and....” She grins with the memory. “He went down on me, then I went down on him. Not easily done, let me tell you, in a fucking Pontiac Sunbird. Not that I remember much of it. We were both very, very drunk.”

He nods, nods, nods and then it slips out, unbidden: “What’s it like?” he asks, very quietly.

It's late afternoon now, and dark outside. But it's also dark inside, the room lit only by the dancing glow of the gas stove. Chloe's eyes glitter in the light of this fire. The rest of her seems to have melted into the darkness of the room. Her voice reaches him from out of that darkness. "Giving a blowjob?"

"Yes," he says.

"Are you curious," she asks.

"Yes," he says.

Another silence, and then again: "Dan, are you gay?"

He takes a deep breath, the deepest the corset will allow, and then clutching his head, lets it out as a long, slow hiss between clenched teeth. In truth, his head doesn't hurt. It doesn't hurt at all. The spot over his temple remains raw and bruised but there's no pain there, only a gentle numbness. He yearns for the old pain, for the contrivance of it, the excuse it gave him. But it's not there. There's nothing but himself when he answers, in a voice barely above a whisper: "no."

"No?" Chloe leans forward, shadowed features emerging from the dark. "Bi, then?"

He shakes his head.

"Dan, what are you—" and then her eyes widen, and yes, she smiles, though uncertainly. "Dan, are you trans?"

To hear it expressed so bluntly is too much. "No!" He jumps to his feet, shakes his head. He tries to explain, but his throat seizes up, and he feels something akin to panic flutter through him. He takes a gulp of air, another, and grips his knees, tightly. "No," he says, and then again, "no. I'm not—" it's absurd to even say it: "a girl, I mean, look at me, it's ridiculous. I just...." He breathes shallowly, clutching at the closet beneath the dress. "I like girls. I like *you*."

"I don't know that liking girls and being trans are mutually exclusionary."

"I'm not a girl, I just want—" his smile is watery and self-mocking. "What I want is fantasy."

"Is it?" Chloe asks.

"Just before I got here," he explains. "I mean, back in the car. No, before that, it starts before that, I—"

"Dan—"

"This morning, Galen had to go to work, and I decided to dress up, I thought it might—the pain, my forehead—but it wasn't that. I wanted to, Chloe, it wasn't the pain. And I knew how to do it, where she hid her stuff, because. But he came home and. Amber. He saw me. He saw me, he saw *me* and—"

"Dan!"

"I can't—" Black dots dance before his eyes. A rushing sound, the pounding of his heart. The room tilts, darkness and sparks of light flowing to one side. But the darkness swirls around him, too, curls in tight bands around his chest and drags him down, and it feels like he's dying,

like it's the end. A staggered step, reaching for the wall, but he misses it and stumbles, spins, falls to the floor. "Breathe, I need—"

She kneels with him. "Stay with me, Dan, look at me—"

"Get it off," he says, clawing at his dress and the corset beneath, "get it off, please."

"I can't," she says. "Not fast enough. Just look at me, Dan. Breathe with me. Mirror my breathing. Breathe in—" and she did, and he forces himself to copy her— "and out"—and a long, slow exhalation, her from deep in the chest, him from the top of his lungs. "Again," and again, and again until the rushing in his ears abates, the room levels off. Kneeling, he hangs his head, hands on his knees.

"You okay now?"

He shakes his head, no. Tears sting his eyes, embarrassment at his weakness, the realisation that she could never look at him again the way she once did. Forever now, the doubt: maybe not a girl, but not quite a man, either. Crossdresser, sissy; weak, fainting.

"No, I guess not," she says. "I'm sorry, Daniel."

True, their relationship was already pretty much dead, before any of this. After what she did, and what he said. But still. Maybe the gulf between them could never be entirely closed, but at least she could have walked away, remembering him as—a man. One who worked hard, possibly worthy of some respect, at least. And emotionally strong; she'd never seen him cry, before.

Tired, weak, he asks her, "please, help me get this corset off. I can't breathe properly and it's hurting. I've worn it for too long."

"Sure. Yeah, that's probably a good idea," she says. "Let's get you out of that dress."

First, she helps him to his feet. Then, she unfastens the button at the back of his neck. He shivers at her touch, at the way her fingers dabble at his neck and draws down the zipper, to just between his shoulder blades. He sighs as the dress loosens around his torso, but also at the way she slips her hand under the dress and slides it down his shoulders, over his hips, to the floor, like parting the skin from the flesh of a delicate, easily bruised fruit. Taking his hand, she helps him step out of the ring at his feet. He stands there in the dim light. Light from the fire sparkles across the inlaid embroidered pattern of the corset, the panties, his bra. His hands hang limply at his side, nervously fingering suspender tabs. He can feel her gaze on him, hear the quiet sound of her breathing. Her breath catches in her throat. His stomach lurches. She's about to laugh at him, he winces in anticipation and isn't sure he can deal with that, right now, it's too much.

But no, she doesn't laugh. Instead, she places one hand on his bare shoulder. The other rests at the curve of his waist. Her fingers splay across his abdomen, along the corset's boning. Now, her breath is hot against his neck. She holds him like that for a moment. Then, slowly but firmly, she turns him towards her. He doesn't want to meet her eyes. His face burns, his eyes are still wet with tears. His lower lip trembles, his cheeks streaked with mascara. Chloe releases his shoulder and gently nudges his chin upwards until they make eye contact. Her lips are moist and slightly parted and the look in her eyes leaves him weak in the knees.

"Chloe?" he begins to ask, but she rests on finger against his lips.

“I am so fucking turned on right now,” she says. Her touch moves from his lips to his forehead. She light touches his injury. He flinches, though it doesn’t hurt. She makes little calming noises, mm, shh; and traces the contour of his ear, then passes her fingers through his short hair. Chloe clasps him by the back of the neck. Her hand at his waist grips him tighter. She likes the corset, he realises. She traces the boning down to his hips, finds the suspenders. She plucks the elasticated strip like a stringed instrument, snaps it against his thigh. The crack sounds loud in the silence of the room. Faint hiss of the gas fire, and their breathing, only. The slow, solemn movement of the wind outside, in the dark. Chloe smiles. Her hand cups his ass. Silk smoothness. She grips him tight, and at the neck, too. Her smiling lips part, tip of tongue between white teeth, almost feral.

Heart pounding in his chest he feels himself as though standing at some vertiginous precipice. She pulls him to her in a fierce kiss. Her lips are soft, and so are his. He tastes the remnants of the lipstick and gloss he put on that morning. Fingers, curling into his ass. Tongue, pushing into his mouth. He whimpers, with need, the entirety of his body trembling in her arms. Oh, how he’d dreamt of this, of fucking her again. But not like this, dressed like this. Yet he wouldn’t change a thing. Terrified, he wants this. And when she pulls back, grinning wickedly, he also smiles, shyly.

“What’s happening?” he asks in a voice barely above a whisper.

“Fucked if I know,” she says, and leads him towards the bed.

Afterwards, Daniel lies on his back on the bed in the log cabin in the woods. Candles lit earlier smoulder in their embers, but out in the darkness beyond the window, solar lamps lining the edge of the lake glow in the night. He still wears the corset, the panties, the stockings. His arms stretch out above him, both wrists tied to the bed’s heavy headboard by colourful scarfs Chloe dug out of her suitcase. Occasionally, early in their relationship, she’d asked him to play little bondage games; he’d always gotten angry, said no. But not tonight.

Wordlessly, with a small, scared nod, he gave consent. She tied him down, wrists and ankles, and kissed him all over and slid his panties down and his cock sprang up, hard and ready, more painfully aroused than he could ever remember. Her naked body rose over him and her skin shone in candlelight. The scarfs dug into his wrist as he reached, desperately, for her beautiful breasts.

No, she said firmly, tapping him on the nose. Be a good girl, and hearing those words, his cock strained all the harder. She dipped low, kissed his thighs, licked his cock and he groaned loudly, desperately, and she mock frowned: I told you to be good, she said, don’t make me gag you, too. Even harder then, if possible. Then she kissed him, his neck and shoulders, wherever his skin was exposed and pale, highlighted by lingerie, thighs and calves; she licked and sucked his toes as he watched, between the jutting mounds of a bra filled with breast forms. His skin thrummed, God, he felt so hot, his entire body straining, his entire consciousness drawn towards the focal point of his cock, upthrust, desperate, taut and ready. Please, he moaned, pulling at his restraints. I need—

She grinned wickedly, her hands latching onto his chest. Kneading his chest, she grinned: this is fun, I like this. Tracing the embroidery and lace edging, her hands slid around his torso, around to his back. A moment later, she removed his bra and its forms, tossed them to

one side. Leaning forward, she kissed his chest—a slow circle drawing ever closer to his nipple—and he hissed, twisting in his restraints. I don't think, he started to say, and she slapped his thigh: quiet, once more out of you and I'm not joking, I've got another scarf. Then, grinning catlike, she lapped at his nipple. He jerked, opened his mouth to tell her he didn't like it, no; but the glittering hardness of her eyes left him silent. Then, she approached the other breast: slow kisses, quick feline licks, only this time, she finished by latching on, lips pursed around his nipple, sucking. He twitched and moaned and didn't like it and realised he was terribly, painfully aroused; and when she pulled back, he felt a twinge of disappointment and thought that maybe, he did like it after all.

Good, she whispered, and stood imperiously above him, eyes dark and hard as they raked across his recumbent form. Clambering onto the bed, she positioned herself over his cock. Eyes wide, he bit his lip, pleaded with her, God, yes. No, she answered. Not yet. He opened his mouth to protest. She slapped his thigh again: not yet. Instead, she moved up the bed, straddled his head. Her pussy glistened. Go on, she instructed, lowering herself over his face. He inhaled deeply. Her muff prickled his face. Again, he tried to reach for her, for her hips or her tits, he didn't know, but he was tied securely. His hips bucked a little, lifted from the mattress. Then flopping back down, he took a first, tentative lick. Mmm, she hummed, and grabbed his head with both hands, fingers curling into his hair. Yes.

It'd been a long time since he'd gone down on her. He once blamed her for not letting him. She told him not to, she wasn't interested. But now, the realisation that maybe that wasn't true, maybe he'd put her off, complained, or simply done a bad job of it. Now, she wanted it. It had been several years since he last ate her out. Remembered what she liked, he faced the task eagerly. In slow, heavy sweeps of the tongue, he traced the contour of her labia. She was already very wet and soon his chin was drenched. He turned his attention upwards, towards the clitoris, flicked his tongue and felt her jerk, heard her sharp intake of breath. Easy, she hissed, and then it was his turn to smile, though she couldn't see it, obviously, and he did it again, and again. Chloe moaned, and her thighs, set on either side of his head, tensed. Then circles, slow, firm, with the tip of the tongue. She moaned again, her grip on his head tightened. He maintained the same rhythm, the constant, languid orbit of his tongue around her clit. A shudder passed through her body. New wetness flooded his mouth. Don't stop, she said, and moaned, keep—her whole body, rigid as a board—incoherent sounds, muffled as her thighs clenched tight around his head, blocked his ears—she pushed down, and he couldn't breathe, his tongue thrusting deep into her pussy, and felt faint.

Breathing heavily, she pulled back. He breathed in as deeply as the corset would allow. Chloe looked down at him with amazement, a lopsided grin. "Jesus fucking Christ, Dan," she said. He looked up at her, face slick with her juices. She shook her head. "Why the fuck didn't we do this before?" Smiling tentatively, he glanced towards his cock, only slightly deflated by his recent efforts. She grinned, lightly grasped it with one hand. "Is this what you want?" she said, and before he could respond, dived down and took him in her mouth.

Daniel gasped, back arcing, eyes fluttering close. He felt his whole body rise from the bed. He was so close to coming, and she'd only just started. Then, the wet warmth of her mouth was gone. The bed shifted as she unmounted and stood. He opened his eyes. She crossed over to her suitcase, returned to the bed a moment later with a condom in hand. Tearing the packet open, she retrieved its latex disc. Again, his hips twitched as she rolled the ring down his erect penis. Then, she clambered back onto the bed and straddled him. Her pussy, with its thin carpet of tangled hairs already slick and matted, poised over his erect cock. And her tits, God, she was

so beautiful. Slowly—ever so slowly—and grinning, eyes locked on his, she lowered herself onto him. There was that moment of eager, final separation—balls tight and straining—and then he was inside of her, deep inside of her, part of her and with that, sudden tears flecked his eyes. She grabbed her tits and kneaded them as she rode him, tossed her head, bit her lip and sighed, groaned, moaned as she controlled the rhythm, and picked up speed. It felt good, impossibly good, too good and he knew he couldn't possibly last long. His heart hammered the inside of his chest. He started to breathe heavily. He tried to suck in a deep breath of air and couldn't. The corset wouldn't let him. Instead, he shifted to long, shallow breaths that set a wheezing counterpoint to Chloe's rhythm. Dots danced at the edge of his sight and his whole body began to tingle, his flesh hummed and the very boundaries of his being seemed to blur and fade. At the centre of the tunnel of his vision, Chloe's face, flushed with pleasure. She pinched her nipples and mauled her own flesh and rode him ever faster. God, she was sexy. Pleasure suffused her every feature—the ecstasy of rough fumbling—the carnality of penetration and control, and what must it feel like, to have tits like that, the heavy sway with every thrust, nipples tight—so tight—pinched and pulled—and penetrated so deeply, filled so deeply, which he'd always taken as a sort of desirable submission to another's needs, but in the ecstatic fervour of Chloe's thrown back head, the white of her eyes and bared white teeth, he sees a hitherto unimaginable loving embrace of the self. And for an instant—

—the briefest of transcendental moments, he feels himself not only in her, but as her. He feels what she feels, was penetrated as she was, and fleetingly knew the weight of breasts, the wetness of cunt, and—

He came, harder than he's ever known, the entirety of his being poured into an explosive climax so intense, he nearly passes out.

She came too, repeatedly, before lifting her sopping wet pussy off of him and padding into the bathroom to wipe herself clean. She left him tied to the bed spread-eagle but when she returned, nearly purring with contentment, she untied his ankles and then cuddled up close, resting her head in the crook of his uplifted arm. Soon, she was asleep.

And now, laying there in the dark, along with a deep lassitude he feels a strange sort of peace, a sensuous serenity instilled by the soft whisper of her breath across his chest, the weight of her breast against his flank. She is a warm presence next to him and though he knows it can't last, for a time, Daniel is at ease.

A knock at the door. He starts—he must've dozed—and his arms ache, his fingers numb. Impossible to tell the time, though he guesses early evening, maybe five or six o'clock. For the first time, he realises he's famished. The knock repeats. "Chloe," he hisses.

She stirs.

"There's someone at the door." He tugs at the bindings. "I can't exactly answer it."

Grumbling, she detaches herself from him. Padding into the bathroom, she emerges with a bathrobe, which she shrugs on as she crosses to the door and disappears from his line of sight. He hears her open the door. A man's voice, and there is a brief conversation in low voices, of which only a few snippets reach Daniel: apologies, don't mean to disturb, thank you, no, thank you, that's great; and then the sound of something heavy being dragged into the cabin. The door closes. Chloe returns, sits at the edge of the bed, and sits there, silently contemplative.

“Chloe?”

“That was John. One of the owners of the Lodge. He said, about an hour ago, that Galen drove over and dropped off your suitcase. I’ve got it over by the door. There’s a letter, too, addressed to you.” She rests her hand against his abdomen, idly traced the corset’s embroidered pattern. “I really enjoyed that, you know, Daniel. To be honest, I more than enjoyed it. It was, without a doubt, the best fuck I’ve ever had. And honestly, I don’t know how that makes me feel. I really don’t. The fact that seeing you dressed like that turned me on the way it did?” Chloe shakes her head. “I don’t know. I never went through a bi-curious phase at school or any shit like that. I’ve never kissed a girl. I’m into men, always have been. And goddamn, but I’m still fucking angry with you! I didn’t come to fucking Chippewa Bay to make up with you. But then, I look at you like this, and...” She shrugs. “I could fucking fuck you all over again.

“And that makes me feel all kinds of fucked up in here,” she says, tapping the side of her head. “And I don’t like that.”

Daniel laughs.

“I’m being serious.”

“I know.” He tugs lightly at his bonds, more performatively than any real effort at escape. “Honestly. But you want to talk about feeling fucked up? I’m the one tied to the bed, Chloe. I’m the one in lingerie. And—” he grimaces, “there’s more, more that I haven’t told you.”

“Yeah, I got that vibe before we, uh, got distracted.”

“I was scared to,” he says.

“And now?”

“I’m still scared,” he admits. He wiggles his fingers. “Hands, too?”

“Not until you tell me the whole story.” But she’s joking, though neither feel particularly inclined to laugh, and as he begins talking, in fits and starts, she unties his wrist. Then he sits there, at the edge of the bed, and tells her about the morning, dressing up and chasing Amber, or rather the ghost of the absent girl through her clothes and her words, even though he didn’t quite know why at the time. But now he sees that in pursuing her, he had been pursuing himself.

“Then Galen came home, and saw me, standing in front of the mirror, looking—well, pretty much as you saw me,” Daniel says. “Except I had a wig on.” He pats his head. “I left it in the car.”

“And?”

“He—” Daniel tries to force a rueful smile, but his face won’t behave, it twists into a grimace, and he feels a wash of shame. “Called me Amber, and grabbed me. He then—” he hesitates, swallows, goes silent.

“He what, Daniel?”

“Kissed me.” He forces himself to meet her gaze. “Really kissed me, hard. Tongue in mouth, kissed me.”

Chloe nods, as though he’d just confirmed a suspicion. “And?”

“A guy kissed me,” Daniels says, “though to be honest, in the moment, I may have kissed him back. Then, I freaked out. That’d never happened before, I didn’t know what to do. I ran for it. Right out the front door, straight to the car, and away.”

“And you came here,” she says.

A rueful smile: “No, not quite.”

“No?”

“No, first I drove a few clicks down the road, pulled over, and—” He shrugs, a little helplessly. “Had a bit of a mental breakdown.”

She rests a hand on his shoulder.

“I was freaking out. I didn’t know what to do. I’d left my suitcase behind, and I was wearing a fucking dress, you know? And I could still, like, taste him? And smell him. He smelled good,” he admits, shaking his head. “And I could still feel him, the way he grabbed me, how helpless I felt, but also how strong he was. Mostly, I still felt... you know, his erection, where it jabbed me.” He holds his hand over his abdomen. “And worse, remembering that, I felt turned on, too, like I was sitting there in the car all aroused and didn’t know what that meant, I was so confused, Chloe.”

“And then my sister called.”

“Kara,” Chloe says, and she can’t keep the disdain from her voice. “What the fuck did she want?”

He winces. “Don’t be like that, Chloe. Please, not now.”

Chloe puffs out her cheeks in annoyance “Fine.”

He waits a moment, watching her, then sighs and continues. “I don’t know why. Her voice, so soon after the kiss, this thing—” he taps his injury, “whatever, it triggered some potent memories. Stuff I’d buried away for a very long time.”

She takes both his hands in hers, lifts him from the floor and onto the bed. “Tell me.”

He tells her the rest of his story. The terrible loneliness of an eleven-year-old boy moved to a new home and school, and not fitting in. Taylor. That grand house at the top of the hill. Also, the start of something unexpected, his new friend wearing a skirt and sparkly top, extending an invitation to join him. The months that followed, escalating experimentation, playing at girl, or at least their youthful concept of what a girl was and might be; and how over time ‘play’ became something more, leading to that final day, in which Daniel discovered the name hiding within.

“Amber?” Chloe asks. She keeps her face purposefully blank; he can read neither approval or disapproval from her, whether she’s disgusted by his admissions, sympathetic or possibly even excited. “You said that was—”

“Yes. It can’t be real, right? The odds of it. But whatever name I had for myself, it’s gone, I can’t remember it. I can only think of hers. And that’s weird, right? That I’d pick Galen’s ex-wife’s name for myself, don’t you think?”

She nods very slowly as he finishes his story: “and so there we were, two prom queens on a Friday night, and suddenly Taylor’s dad was standing right behind us. I guess he came

home early and suddenly, we weren't a pair of sexy girls, just pervert boys playing dress-up. I never found out why he came home early. What I remember is that he called my dad, who dragged me home. I was still wearing the dress. Kara was home and saw the whole thing. She never told me. And—" When he tries to speak, nothing comes out. "And then." His chin wavers, his throat is tight. He doesn't want to say it to someone outside the family. Once these events live in the mind of others, they become real and true and forever change not only how they see him but how he sees himself.

"What happened?" Chloe asks, gently.

"He hit me," Daniel says. "My dad hit me."

Chloe takes his hand, gives him a comforting squeeze. "I'm sorry. You never said—"

Daniel rubs his shoulder. "I didn't know. I forgot, or blocked it out, I don't know, I guess I just didn't want it to be true. But in forgetting that he hit me I forgot everything else, too. Honestly. But what happened was: Dad hit me, and my legs were all tangled up in the prom dress, and this all happened at the top of the stairs, and then I fell down the stairs. I don't know how bad it was because I don't really remember the part where I fell down. But it was bad enough for me to wake up in a hospital bed. I do know I hit my head on the way down." He taps at his forehead, at his injury. "Right here. What a coincidence, eh?"

Hesitantly, delicately, Chloe reaches out and once again lightly strokes the discoloration over his temple. "Yeah."

"When I woke up, I had no memory of what happened, any of it, everything I just told you about: Taylor, dressing up. Amber. All of it. And nobody ever told me."

As though a living thing, waiting and lurking in the dark corners of the room, a deep and heavy silence slithers into the room and coils around them both. They sit together, in that silence, in the near darkness, at the edge of the bed. Very gradually, Chloe extends her hand across the mattress, fingertips brushing Daniel's. He slides his hand into hers. They sit there, side by side, holding hands, for some time. At some point, there is a loud ping from his phone. This seems to dispel the spell over them.

"I don't know what any of this means," Chloe says, standing. "I can't pretend to understand what you're going through or how you're feeling right now. And I don't know what you want or what you need or think you need. You say you're not gay, and who am I to argue that? And you say you're not bi. Okay. But then you insist you're also not trans. And sure, how can I argue that? Like, what does it even mean? I have no idea, I really don't know. I don't have any transsexual friends, as far as I know, I've never even met one. So if you say you're not, then sure, I guess you're not. You know better than I do.

"Although, I've got to say, sitting here and talking to you tonight? It felt a hell of a lot more like chatting with one of my girlfriends than talking to my boyfriend." Chloe says this over her shoulder, as she crosses over to the fireplace. He left his phone on the table there. Daniel watches the play of light across her naked ass as she walks. Despite the fact they had sex less than an hour ago, he feels himself grow aroused again. See, he wants to say, how can I be a girl if the sight of a naked girl turns me on?

"Talking about high school proms and the first time we gave a hand job to some boy, and what does come tastes like?" Chloe walks back over to him. "And the way you perk up every

time you talk about *your* boy, or these clothes?” Standing over him, she sees his erection, smiles slightly and shakes her head. She passes his phone over. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s new, maybe it’s always been there at some level. But just to say, I’m getting major girl vibes from you, okay? And what that means for you, or me, for us?” She shrugs. “No fucking clue. Although I enjoyed it, I really did, talking to my girlfriend tonight. Either way, I’m grabbing a shower. Maybe we can figure this out, afterwards.”

Daniel sits there for a few minutes, until he hears the shower start. He imagines her naked body under the coursing water and his cock twitches. His cock stirs and stands semi-erect. Picking up his phone from the bed, he unlocks it and checks his messages. The recent message was from his sister, a short text with a picture attached. The written message is a single, short line: *from that night*. And with it, a photograph of another photograph. From the perspective of the original, she took it from her bedroom window overlooking the entrance of their old home outside Kitchener. His dad, reaching for the doorknob. And behind him, a boy in a tight black dress.

Daniel stares at this old picture of himself in a borrowed prom dress for some time. Then he stands. There is a tall, narrow mirror by the door to the bathroom. He pads over to it. His erection has already subsided. In reflection, he sees himself, still wearing the corset and stockings and nothing else. Curious, he holds his free hand flat over his crotch. Then, he presses down, pushing his penis back between his thighs. Withdrawing his hand, he keeps his thighs squeezed together. It’s not entirely convincing, but he tries to imagine what it would be like to not have a penis between his legs. His attention returns to the phone and the picture there. Eyes flick back and forth between the past and the present and a terrible sadness grows within him and settles in his stomach. It seems to him then that he catches a glimpse of her, of that girl who died on the very same day she sprang to life. And perhaps she isn’t dead but rather, like a small, wounded animal, lies curled up and asleep within the hollow space of his soul. Hurt and afraid, licking her wounds, waiting.

When Chloe steps out of the shower he’s sat again on the edge of the bed, still contemplating the photograph on his phone. By this time, he knows what he wants to do. Quizzically, she looks at him still sitting half-naked. She instantly detects the change in him. “What is it?” she asks. He passes her the phone. She looks at the picture, zooms in on the young boy in the sparkling black mermaid dress. “Is that...?”

“Yes,” he says.

“I recognize that look. You’ve decided something.” Chloe orders food from the Lodge. They eat and drink together, and he explains what it is he wants to do, and why he thinks he needs to do it, but also how he needs her help. Ever pragmatic, she queries a few points, pushes him to think certain ideas through a little further. Are you sure? she asks frequently. You won’t be able back out of this, she says, not easily. And he nods at each question, and says, yes, yes I know. But If I don’t do it this way, I’ll just run away again.

And what will you do? he asks, and she answers, I don’t know. Check out Chippewa Bay, I guess. Maybe try and figure out a few things for myself. Don’t suppose there’s a lesbian bar in this little Podunk town? She laughs, a little uncomfortably. I can stay until the 24th, and then I’ll drive down to my parents for Christmas. That gives you two days. I’ll wait to hear from you. Depending on how things go, I can be back here on Boxing Day.

They talk a little more, about the sex they just had and about their relationship and about the past years of their relationship. The entire conversation is tinged with melancholy. It's nearly nine o'clock by the time they're both ready. They leave the log cabin. Daniel has nothing with him but his borrowed purse. He's wearing the dress over the borrowed corset, panties and stockings, and Amber's slingback sandals. Chloe loaned him a cardigan against the cold. Before leaving, using the makeup in his purse, he made a passable attempt at fixing his face. It was easier this time, as though youthful memories of practice suddenly returned to him. Chloe watched with a certain amazement, saying nothing. Together, they walk the pebbled path back to the car. She holds his hand and is there to catch him should he stumble.

Then, they're in Chloe's rental car. You okay to drive, he asks, and she laughs: after one glass? Yeah, no problem. They talk a little more as they drive, but their voices are strained with disbelief at what they're doing. Mostly however, they drive in silence punctuated by the music of local radio playing Taylor Swift's latest. The forested back road is dark and empty. Headlights light up snowbanks and the trees. At one point they round a bend in the road and stop, a half dozen deer blocking the way ahead. A dozen bright eyes watch them, brown and white dotted bodies frozen. Then, just as suddenly as they appear, they're gone, prancing with delicate steps into the woods beyond the road. Chloe and Daniel look at each other. It feels like a gift, what they just saw, like a sort of miracle.

Soon after, Chloe pulls over. A little further up the road, a house casts its lonely glow onto the road.

"Last chance," she says. "You sure about this?"

Daniel nods.

"Good luck." Leans forward, they kiss, but only lightly so as to not ruin Daniel's makeup. Pulling back, she shakes her head. "This is fucking crazy," she says.

Daniel gnaws on his lower lips. "I have to know," he says.

He steps out of the car. It's cold and he shivers, pulling the cardigan closer around him. He checks his purse, grips it tightly at his side. Glancing back into the car, he sees Chloe, watching. She, too, is chewing on her bottom lip and her eyes are full of concern. She forces a smile. Daniel turns away and begins to walk up the road. Without looking over his shoulder, he hears the car, the crunch of snow beneath its tires as it reverses and turns around. Chloe drives away, back the way she came. He listens until the sound of the car is gone and then he is alone, in the quiet dark of a rural backroad.

The walk is a short one. His steps are short and hesitant. Maybe he should have asked her to drop him off a little closer. Already, his feet feel numb with cold. With each step he has to take care to not slip on patches of snow or ice on the asphalt. Hugging himself, Daniel continues down the road. Other than the light of the house ahead, it is utterly dark. And silent, but for a slight wind shivering the branches of trees.

He stops and takes a deep breath and turns his back to the house. A sudden almost irresistible desire to run after Chloe seizes him. But she is gone and he is surrounded by almost impenetrable darkness. The moon above is the faintest thin crescent and hidden behind dark clouds. Yet in looking up at the sky he notices the wide expanse of stars. His breath catches in his throat. Back home, the constant urban glow of Toronto drowns out the night sky. He has no memory of the sky in his childhood. But now, innumerable shimmering and glimmering

pinpoints of light fills the space above. The vast sweep of the night leaves Daniel feeling very small and very alone. Then, it occurs to him that the starlight he sees has travelled for millions of years. Many of these stars may no longer even exist. They may have winked out long ago. Yet their light endures, to reach him this very moment, and Daniel feels himself suffused with the light of these distant pinpoints of light. He feels a quiet stirring, an echoing calmness that eases his fears. Maybe the star within me too was snuffed out long ago, he thinks. But its light travels onwards, still shimmering brilliantly.

Daniel walks the rest of the short distance to the house. The air is crisp and cold, the night clear and silent. He passes the damaged tree, its bark ripped and torn. Then, the dark rectangle where his car sat. Gravel shifts underfoot. He approaches the door. He takes a deep breath and knocks on the door.

The door opens. Galen stands framed in warm light. At first, he appears surprised, then cautious, almost afraid. The darkness and silence of the night draws in close and the two stand like this until hesitation gives way to happiness: “You came back,” Galen says.

“I came back.”

“I’m glad you came back, Daniel.”

“No.” Firmly, a decision made. “Call me Amber.”

The End