



*Face  
It*

GEORGETTE KAPLAN



# Prologue

2007

MICHELLE HARLOW WAS STRAIGHT. STRAIGHT, straight, straight. Elizabeth kept telling herself that because she wasn't sure Michelle remembered.

Elizabeth had been studying. Easy to do, since her roommate had disappeared to a party she'd insisted on calling a "social mixer." Probably part of Michelle's drive to make everything boring, which she'd been doing since they'd first met and Michelle had invited her to LinkedIn. It was amazing she didn't call her precious *Star Wars* movies "Star Police Actions."

Elizabeth liked being friends with Michelle, even if she'd never admit it. Despite being Daddy's little girl (she had a Disney princess bedspread. Who did that? If anyone was going to be sleeping on Princess Jasmine, Elizabeth would've thought it'd be herself), she never judged Elizabeth, not even in a hippie-drippy "your self-expression is so lovely" way. After Michelle overheard a phone call about Elizabeth leaving her strap-on in someone's apartment, all she asked was if Elizabeth used protection. *Yes, it's called fucking a woman.*

Elizabeth wondered if she scared Michelle a little bit. If that weren't the case, she'd have loved to share the details, since Michelle was clearly interested in a little bit more than whatever she got up to with her boyfriends. Instead, she listened to stories like how Richard took Michelle to a vineyard and they got to stomp grapes, and wasn't that fun? Or the time she'd caught Bill chatting with some girl while standing too close to her and she didn't know if she even *could* forgive him. Not that Elizabeth cared or anything.

It was just polite. Like smiling at a baby or feeding a stray dog. Even if Michelle was more like a stray deer...or a baby tiger. Something.

Elizabeth's convictions had been firmly in place until the moment Michelle had flounced in, buzzed enough to trip where the hall's tile floor became the dorm room's carpet and sober enough to catch herself on the bunk bed instead of taking a header.

Elizabeth had looked up from her Introduction to Psychology text to find Michelle staring at her with a downright predatory intensity. "We're watching a *Star Wars*."

Michelle loved *Star Wars*. Elizabeth didn't. At least not the prequels, which Michelle was on like she'd get a free good movie for watching them. Five minutes in, and even Natalie Portman couldn't trick Elizabeth into thinking it wouldn't be painful in an entirely bad, nonsexual way.

Elizabeth was assertive. She could've shoved Michelle away and gone to do her homework in the quad. It wasn't like she hadn't done it before. But apparently a two-drink minimum made Michelle all...cuddly. She'd dragged Elizabeth to the bottom bunk and collapsed on her lap, actually rubbing a few not-gender-neutral places as she got them both crammed into the same tiny IKEA bed.

Not that Elizabeth had a thing for straight girls. It was just nice to see Michelle unwind for once, though it obviously wasn't just the drinks that had pulled the stick out. Maybe she'd broken up with Richard? Wait, but hadn't they had a big fight that'd metastasized into some sort of break? She supposed they could've hooked back up again, then broken up for good. Like the reunion special after a show was canceled, proving the dead horse wasn't just faking.

Why did Elizabeth think that'd be so awesome when clearly it would just mean she'd have to pick Michelle up from wherever crazed sorority girls went to get over men who still wore their high school letterman jackets?

"So this is the last one?" Elizabeth asked, wary of future appointments with Jedi and Sith.

"Yup," Michelle replied. "The saga comes full circle."

"Good. I don't think I could take any more of these."

Michelle squinted at her. "Oh, Elizabeth—"

"I'm not saying it's wrong for you to like them. I'm just glad that it's done with. We've seen the whole thing. It's over."

“Yeah,” Michelle agreed after a pause. “The Rise and Fall of Anakin Skywalker has been fully told.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I mean, it’d be great if they made more, but they’re probably not going to.”

“Great?” Elizabeth asked. “What would they even do? Make a sequel to *Return of the Jedi* where the Empire comes to power again, the Jedi are wiped out again, and they build a new Death Star?”

“Maybe they could make one between the trilogies. Filling in the gaps.”

“Like what? How Darth Vader goes to the bathroom? Why the Starfighters are called X-wings if they don’t have the Latin alphabet?”

“They’re smart. They can come up with something.”

“Chewbecca gets cancer. The Academy Award-winning story,” Elizabeth suggested, and even Michelle wasn’t too nerdy to have a sense of humor about that.

They settled down and watched the special effects. Elizabeth tried to be wowed by them, as hard as it was when she knew someone had just gotten a bunch of computers and had them go for a long time. It just didn’t seem hard to her.

“Elizabeth?” Michelle asked, in a quiet voice. Mostly sober, as opposed to the chipper tone she’d had as she’d cursed America for not getting the subtleties of George Lucas’s genius while trying to get the DVD out of a snap case.

“What?” Elizabeth had been ignoring the movie to look at Michelle’s hair. It was tumbling all over Elizabeth’s legs and chest, exploded there from the impact of Michelle dropping her torso in Elizabeth’s lap. She had an inexplicable urge to touch that little river of gold that flowed from Michelle’s scalp. Did straight girls do that, or was it too gay? Elizabeth was gay and she never touched anyone’s hair.

Michelle’s eyes narrowed like she was contemplating something. “You’re a good friend. If you don’t want to watch this, you can put on something else.”

“It’s fine,” Elizabeth said. “Really.”

“You’re a very good friend.”

Saints wouldn’t have replayed that peculiarly emphasized “very” in their heads so much. That’s why Elizabeth wasn’t a saint.

She reached down and touched Michelle's hair, sinking her fingers in to feel Michelle's scalp. There was a warmth coming off Michelle's head, not feverish but subdued, and it persisted all the way down to the back of Michelle's neck. Elizabeth kept petting her hair, seeing if it got any hotter.

Christ, she was in love with a straight girl. She didn't know when it had happened, what final ingredient had caused the alchemical change that made their relationship so much more and at the same time so much less, if she had changed or Michelle had changed or if they'd just pressed up against each other too long not to click into place. Maybe it really was love at first sight. But then, in all the time Elizabeth had known her, Michelle still hadn't gone gay.

"You're lucky, you know that, Liz? You're actually an interesting person," Michelle pontificated. "Which most hot chicks aren't."

"Says the hot chick."

"I'm not hot, I just have good salesmanship," she demurred. "It's like one of those RPGs Shane plays. You put your...dice into perfect hair and tits that actually need a bra, there's not much left for personality. You have extra dice."

"Not very feminist of you," Elizabeth said gently.

"It is!" Michelle sat up, rubbing at her face. "It is, because men are the ones whose fault it is. You get a hot chick—it's not her fault she's hot—but instantly, every guy starts acting like she's funny and smart and everything she does is cute, so she never actually has to *become* interesting. And you're not like those girls."

"You're not like those girls either," Elizabeth said mollifyingly, rubbing Michelle's shoulder. "Or Bigfoot. Mothman..."

"I'm serious!" Michelle laid back down. "You probably know more women than me—aren't the hot ones all about make-up and clothes and guys, or girls? Y'know, even in your neck of the woods?"

"What I think," Elizabeth said, "is that everyone's *interesting* in some way. Just not to everyone else. I mean, some people are really into serial killers. Me, it's like, okay, I get it, you had a bad childhood, stop wearing people's faces... Right?"

"No wearing faces," Michelle agreed boozily. Then something sparked inside her and propelled her head backwards, to look up at Elizabeth. "Singers, now, singers totally prove my point. All singers do now is lip-sync

and a little dance. No one writes their own music or anything. The moment people started spending two hundred dollars a seat to watch Britney Spears do karaoke, pop music *died*. And that's what my sister wants to be. She's in high school now, going out with all the boys, probably going to be married before me. Because if she shows *everyone* her belly button, her future husband is bound to see it..."

"Well, maybe you'll get lucky and someone will throw lightning bolts in her face." Elizabeth squinted at the screen. "Is that really what was up with the guy in the last one? I thought he was just really old. And not taking care of himself right."

Michelle stared straight ahead, coincidentally in the direction of the screen. "When I said your neck of the woods, I didn't mean about a literal woods."

"It's okay, I do own some flannel."

"Yeah, you're, like, a lesbian, right?"

That struck Elizabeth as a very odd thing to hear from a girl in your lap, whose hair you were petting, who you were watching *Star Wars* with. "Bisexual, actually."

Michelle got up, but it was just to plant her head more comfortably on Elizabeth's ribs. They were oriented in mostly the same direction now, lying on the bed parallel to the TV, so they had to turn their heads to see Ewan McGregor. Which Elizabeth wasn't doing, even if he had a beard.

"But you prefer women?" Michelle asked once they got settled. "Why?"

Elizabeth wondered how to phrase her response. Then she figured that Michelle was probably too drunk to care. "Easier to bum perfume off them."

Michelle laughed. She didn't normally laugh. She had a way of smiling and ducking her head. But she had a good laugh, even if she didn't get much practice. "But what do lesbians do, exactly?" Michelle blinked a few times like she'd lost her train of thought. "In bed, I mean? Not for social gatherings or..."

Apparently, that was the end of that sentence. "It's mostly just whatever feels good. Everyone's different. And everyone wants to experiment, too, so...it's not like a salon appointment," she answered, feeling a little awkward.

Michelle laughed again.

Elizabeth could get used to it.

“Elizabeth, you wanna feel my breasts?” She looked up with a zealous expression that made Elizabeth laugh, it was just so—and this was all so... It was like she was the one who’d been drinking.

“What kind of party did you go to?” Elizabeth asked.

Michelle looked upset now. “I just mean that if you wanted to, you could touch my breasts. God.” She turned her head decisively to her left, watching the movie now.

“I’m...sorry,” Elizabeth said reluctantly. She hated apologizing, even if it did come easy with Michelle. The woman was a kicked puppy, even if she had been underfoot. “Do you want me to touch your...” It sounded damn awkward repeating that. “Do you want me to touch you?”

Michelle shrugged. “You can if you want to.”

Michelle was wearing layers, blue sleeves shooting out of her jacket’s white fleece. The jacket sleeves were rolled up because Michelle had bought the thing on sale and the sleeves were too short for it. Elizabeth reached down and took her hands, balled up in the sheets that had splayed around their legs in all the maneuvering. Her fingertips massaged the backs of Michelle’s hands until, naturally, organically, they relaxed. Elizabeth eased her hands down and joined them with Michelle’s, thumbs sliding around Elizabeth’s wrists to rub at her pulse points.

With their arms together, Elizabeth could lift Michelle with her barely noticing, hitch her up so Elizabeth could slide underneath and lower her back down so their faces were together, their cheeks rubbing as Michelle landed next to her on the pillow. “We don’t just grope each other’s breasts,” Elizabeth said soothingly, her words soft since Michelle’s ear was right there, begging to be bitten. “Us lesbians.”

“Girl kissed me at the party,” Michelle muttered. “Stuck her tongue down my throat. I kept thinking how nice it would’ve been if she hadn’t tasted like Smirnoff Ice. I was walking and one of those campus carts asked me if I wanted a ride, and I thought I’d see you. I really wanted to see you.” Michelle sighed longingly. She shifted, trying to get closer, and her hip banged against Elizabeth’s lap, her crotch.

Elizabeth shuddered. It was a surprise how sensitive she was, how suddenly uncomfortable her tissue-thin panties and stiff jeans were. She wanted to be in something pretty, needed to be in something pretty to feel wanted, to be in control. But she could really enjoy being out of control.

Michelle seemed to echo her thoughts. She growled suddenly and flipped over, burying herself in Elizabeth. Elizabeth got a face full of hair as Michelle nipped at her neck, butterflying kisses from her shoulder to her ear. Only the thin straps of Elizabeth's tanktop stood in her way and Michelle pulled them aside, a gesture that sent ripples down Elizabeth's body until they centered on her cunt, wet and needful.

"You move fast..." Elizabeth exclaimed, breathless.

"No time like the present," Michelle moaned happily. Settling on top of Elizabeth, she linked their hands once more, pushing Elizabeth's up to the headboard. With a grin, she rubbed her thumbs across Elizabeth's wrists. Elizabeth dutifully moaned. Michelle smiled and leaned down to lick her way from the hollow of Elizabeth's throat to the point of her chin. "Still don't wanna touch my breasts?"

Elizabeth tried to answer, but Michelle was stronger than she looked—she held Elizabeth's hands just where they were. "No? Maybe if you saw them, you'd want to touch..." She swayed in to give Elizabeth a closer look, the zipper on her sweater jangling from its unacceptably high perch on Michelle's cleavage. Elizabeth reared up and bit down on it, letting Michelle's movements pull it down for her as she held the zipper in place.

Michelle was beautiful. Her breasts were perfect. Not too big, definitely not too small, and so perky it was like they had never even heard of gravity. Her nipples poked through the thin material of her top, demanding to be touched...pinched...twisted. Elizabeth actually felt her mouth water. *Please, God, let Michelle get off on that.*

"Turn off the TV," Michelle said, keeping those damned breasts just a little ways from Elizabeth's mouth where they needed to be. Her voice was lower and sultrier than Elizabeth had ever heard it.

"That's on my agenda," Elizabeth growled. She really had no wish to associate this memory with Jar-Jar in any way.

"Should I do it?" Michelle nodded toward the remote laying on the bunk-bed's ladder. Just that motion dipped her breasts a little closer, enough to make Elizabeth feel feverish.

"Turn. The TV. Off," she ordered.

Michelle complied happily, for a moment holding Elizabeth's wrists in only one hand. She was taken by surprise when Elizabeth didn't even wait for the screen to shrink to a dot to make her move. She wrapped her legs

around Michelle, snapping them shut like a steel trap, holding Michelle very still as she lifted her face to Michelle's cleavage.

"Oh!" Michelle said sharply, then, softer, "Oh..." as Elizabeth licked at the fabric over her nipple, giving her the barest hint of warmth and moisture. Her voice deepened, "Oh," as Elizabeth dotted the tip of her breast with small kisses, little more than invitations. She tried to shift over, but Elizabeth held her fast.

Michelle let go of Elizabeth's hands, buried her fists in Elizabeth's dark hair, and forced her lips elsewhere.

The moment she let go, Elizabeth rolled them over, off the bed, where they landed in a tangle of bedsheets and body parts and the pushed-up carpet Michelle had brought from home. Elizabeth laughed triumphantly as she mounted Michelle, pulling her tanktop aside, sinking her fingers into Michelle's incredible breasts and squeezing until Michelle cried out, from pain or pleasure or both.

"Lesbians..." Michelle gasped; Elizabeth couldn't blame her. She was rutting against her leg, clutching her breasts. "Lesbians use their tongues, right?"

Elizabeth paused, hair in front of her face, her knee poised at Michelle's wet center, her entire body vibrating like a plucked guitar string. "Yes."

"And fingers?" Michelle was out of breath. She had to swallow in air. "Not just...you know...rubber things?"

"Why?" Elizabeth asked, out of breath herself. "Would you like a rubber thing?"

"No." Michelle took a deep breath and said calmly, "I want your tongue."

A wide grin fixed, perhaps permanently, on Elizabeth's face.

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The next time Elizabeth saw Michelle, it was in the quad, with students all around, tanning on the grass and taking advantage of one of the few places where free Wi-Fi didn't fall under the library's strict rules. She was on Richard's lap, laughing as he explained an old scar on his elbow to one of his football buddies.

Michelle spotted Elizabeth a second later and sped over to her as Elizabeth backed away. Elizabeth sat down a second before they collided,

digging out her phone. Even as the LCD screen lit up, Michelle was sitting down on the bench beside her.

“Hey.”

“Hey there,” Elizabeth replied. She felt foolish. Useless.

“We’re going to Buffalo Palace later. You want anything?”

“Huh?”

“Buffalo Palace,” Michelle repeated. She really didn’t have the face for duplicity. Everything came out perfectly sincere. “It’s a new place on 122nd. All the guys are wild for it, but don’t let that discourage you too much.”

“What’s Buffalo Palace have to do with last night?”

“What’s last night have to do with right now?”

Elizabeth shut her eyes, trying to force down the blush rising to her cheeks. God, this was why she didn’t date. Was everyone in the entire world so...frustrating? “You kissed me,” she said, putting it simply.

“Yes, I know I did.”

“I kissed you. I did *a lot* to you...”

“I know, I know...it happens a lot, really. A lot of people do that.” Michelle squinted, like she was holding in whatever unknowable thoughts were contained behind her eyes. “They’re just not all...like you...”

A doom-and-gloom thought hit Elizabeth. “What are you doing with Richard?” she asked, stricken.

“We’re friends, Liz. Duh. Just because we broke up doesn’t mean we hate each other all of a sudden.”

“Friends like you and I are friends?”

“Of course not. I’m not friends with anyone like I’m friends with you.” She took Elizabeth’s hand. “You’re my *best* friend.”

Elizabeth wanted to rip her hand out of Michelle’s. She wanted to pull away so hard that she took Michelle’s arm off at the socket, like the default on some loan Michelle refused to pay.

She didn’t, though. It felt too good, having Michelle’s hand in hers.

# Chapter 1

## November, Present Day

JANET LACE SAT AT HER desk. Wendy Cedar sat *on* her desk, the tight pantyhose over her thighs straining as she crossed her legs under a crisp skirt. Sitting back in her office chair, idly eating from a container of chow mein, Janet managed to treat the sight of Wendy's thighs—and the woman attached to them—in an entirely blasé manner.

"I love the way you eat," Wendy said. She was leaning back, resting her hands almost on the edge of Janet's desk, and the position made her already short skirt ride up nearly to her panties. "Just...the way your lips open. I don't know how to explain it. It's like you *know* that whatever you put in your mouth is going to taste good and you're just determined to enjoy it."

"I sense a subtext to this conversation," Janet said, lips parting softly, chopsticks gently depositing a morsel of food inside her mouth, teeth working soundlessly behind wet lips.

"I can understand why you're hungry." Wendy toyed with the hem of her skirt, pinching one iota of the material and dragging it a little to the left, a little to the right, examining how it hung over her leg. "That was a long meeting. Were you thinking about eating the entire time? That must've been hard. Thinking about something and wanting something that whole time, but not being able to get it."

"You're really confusing me. I have *no* idea what you could be referring to. You're a closed book to me, Wendy. An enigma wrapped in a riddle that showed up on an episode of *Lost*."

"I'll give you a hint." Wendy teasingly jerked one side of her skirt up a little. She pinched the other side and pulled it upward as well, rising the

skirt in fits and jerks until she'd pulled it over something long, black, and hard, protruding from her crotch with modest exuberance.

Janet gazed at it curiously, teasing Wendy right back by adjusting her glasses, knowing Wendy could read a world into the small gesture. "Did you have that on through the *entire* meeting, or did you put it on after?"

"Do I go big or go home? The whole damn time, Janet. It's great for the self-confidence. You could see why guys would think remaking anything from the eighties was a good idea."

Janet shrugged. "Takes balls."

"Actually, no, it's just the shaft. The balls cost extra."

Janet nodded. Then she took another bite of chow mein.

"Well?" Wendy asked.

"Well what?"

Wendy flattened her hands into two chopping implements, pointed squarely at her crotch. "*Well?*"

"Wendy, I'm eating."

"And I'm seducing you!"

"You can seduce me anytime. My food's warm now."

"*So am I,*" Wendy said sultrily, batting her eyelashes.

Janet had to admit, she was good at that. She wondered if Wendy had stolen some of her mascara.

Janet took another bite.

"Hand over the chow mein."

"You were the one who wanted me to relax my diet. Now we're back to me not eating glutens?" she teased.

"Give!"

Janet dutifully handed over the take-out carton, which Wendy stirred with the chopsticks. Then gave her strap-on a brisk tap, rocking it in front of Janet.

Janet gave it a long, hard look before glancing up at Wendy.

Wendy paused with a bite of chow mein halfway to her mouth.

Janet noted with a little satisfaction that her chopstick technique could use some work. She had one gripped in her fingers and was holding the other in her palm and just pinching the whole thing together in the chow mein to pull up whatever she could get—

"Do you like my strap-on, slave?" Wendy asked, interrupting Janet's mental note to send Wendy a Wikihow.

Janet's thighs clenched momentarily. It was almost frustrating, how Wendy could get her just by deepening her voice a little and looking her in the eye. As goofy and as silly as she could be, she could also be this—*goddess*. It was irritating as hell.

"It's beautiful, Mistress," Janet replied, meaning every word.

Wendy took a bite of chow mein. Janet stared at the dildo while she swallowed. "What do you want to do with it?"

Janet closed her eyes a moment. It felt like the air was going into her lungs hotter, scorching her throat and then coming out between her parted lips like liquid flame. "I want to kiss it. It's so big and beautiful and *yours*..."

"So kiss it."

Janet bent her head faithfully, turning to the side so Wendy could watch her lips as they parted, folded, forming a sucking seal on the head of the dildo, a quiet pucker as she kissed it, then pulled away, the contact just wet enough for her lips to pull at the silicone.

Wendy set the chow mein down and moved her free hand to rest almost affectionately on top of Janet's head. She pressed down.

Janet let herself be eased downward, her lips contacting the tip of the strap-on, closed but wet, smearing her own saliva around her mouth. "You're wet, mistress. I can smell you behind your cock..."

"*Open*," Wendy said, the slightest hint of force under her words. "Open your mouth."

Janet parted her lips slightly. She always resisted a little. Just to find out how much Wendy wanted it. It was petty, the kind of thing that would infuriate Janet if she was playing top, but she couldn't help it. The way Wendy reacted took her from cute all the way to... Janet didn't know what it was, but it was exactly her fetish.

Wendy pushed down again with a hint of firmness, and Janet obediently opened her mouth, feeling the dildo move between her teeth and across her tongue. Her throat, she knew now. Wendy wouldn't be satisfied until it was in her throat.

\* \* \*

Just outside Janet's office, Elizabeth Smile sat at the secretarial desk, under strict orders that Janet and Wendy were not to be disturbed. She didn't know what they were doing, but she knew exactly what that meant.

She was watching cat videos on YouTube when Donnie Parsons made a break for the door, a binder clutched under his arm. *Project Old Spice*, as Elizabeth mentally referred to it.

“One moment please,” she said to him, holding up a finger. The video continued playing out; the kitten fell behind the sofa. Elizabeth took off her headphones. “Yes?”

“Is Lace free?”

Elizabeth folded her hands together. “No, she’s in a meeting.”

The question had clearly been a formality. Donnie didn’t seem to have a contingency plan for not going in. “This is important. It’s the plans for our new system, a dual-roto—”

“Man, I just work here,” Elizabeth interrupted.

His eyes narrowed. “It’s important,” he reiterated.

“So’s her meeting. She’s with the CEO’s kid.”

Donnie blinked. “The CEO?”

“Oh yeah. She’s a majority shareholder. And she’s letting Janet have it.”

“She is?”

Elizabeth nodded. “She’s had Janet bending over forward all morning.”

“Bending over backwards.”

“What?”

“The saying is ‘bending over backwards.’”

Elizabeth inclined her head. “I bet you’re right. If you’ll just leave that with me, I’ll get it to Janet as soon as she finishes.”

Heaving a sigh, Donnie set the binder down on Elizabeth’s desk. “It is urgent.”

“Like I said, Janet will have it as soon as she’s done being reamed out.”

Wendy came out a few cat videos later, her brow sweaty, her hair a little messy, her clothes just finishing being straightened. She was quiet, but she had a way of walking that giggled, and she hummed with confidence as she leaned against Elizabeth’s desk with a satisfied exhale.

“Don’t look so smug,” Elizabeth told her, reaching into the cooler in her filing cabinet and pulling out a Gatorade. “If I owned the company, I’d have sex on the desks, too.”

Wendy took the Gatorade gratefully. “I don’t own the company. Just one particular vice president.”

Elizabeth rolled her eyes. “You need Jesus. Since I don’t have that on me...” She picked up the binder and held it out. “Please don’t spank anyone with this.”

Wendy snatched it away from her and leafed through it. “Well now. I’ll let Janet know.”

“Again?” Elizabeth asked as Wendy started to turn the doorknob to Janet’s office. “You’re an animal.”

“It was our lunch hour,” Wendy said defensively. “And hey, are we still on for movie night?”

“Yes, yes, so by all means, get it out of your system before you have me over.”

\* \* \*

Owing to what Elizabeth could only think was Wendy’s bad influence, Janet owned a home entertainment center that would’ve been the envy of any man-cave. Elizabeth almost felt bad about watching *Flight of the Phoenix* on it. Seemed like they should watch Ingmar Bergman or something.

“Babe, could you build an airplane out of another airplane?” Wendy asked Janet, sitting in her lap but otherwise keeping the private displays of affection to a minimum.

Elizabeth appreciated that.

“I absolutely could do that,” Janet said, before demonstrating how a minimum wasn’t zero.

“Dennis Quaid is really good in this,” Elizabeth said. “But I haven’t seen him in, like, any movies lately. It’s too bad. He was great in *Innerspace*.”

Wendy came up for air. “He’s like a...not a poor man’s Harrison Ford, but like not quite Harrison Ford. Like Harrison Ford has that certain something and Dennis Quaid has everything but the something, but he’s still...”

Elizabeth nodded along. “The Zachary Quinto to Ford’s Nimoy.”

“Exactly.”

Janet tightened the hand she had on Wendy’s thigh. “I’m glad this is reminding you of ruggedly handsome character actors.”

“Treat Williams!” Wendy cried. “Now *he’s* a poor man’s Harrison Ford.”

“The Harrison Ford you would see in *Indiana Jones: The Series*,” Elizabeth agreed.

“Yeah, on UPN.”

“Syndicated on weekends.”

“After *Charmed* or something.”

“I liked *Charmed*.”

Janet threw up her hands. “I would like to remind the jury that we watched *Moonlight* and it didn’t provoke this much debate.”

“We’re calling *this* debate?” Wendy asked. She picked up one of the countless remotes that controlled the TV and its myriad of appliances and speakers, using this one to unerringly call up a music player and put on a light, airy Mediterranean beat. That done, she dropped the remote and stood, wiggling and swaying her hands in vague time to guitar strings being gently caressed.

“Actually,” Elizabeth said, “my idea for *Indiana Jones and the Appropriation of Culture* would be that his long-lost brother shows up. Montana Jones. Maybe Nevada Jones.”

“Let me guess,” Janet said, “he’s played by Dennis Quaid.”

“Exactly.”

Wendy was putting her hips into the music. “Is he an evil twin?”

“There are hints,” Elizabeth said. “He’s a bit of a rogue. You don’t know which side he’s on.”

“So Indy can’t trust him,” Janet said.

“Exactly. But he wants to, ’cause it’s his brother. But also there’s a sibling rivalry thing.”

“There is room on this floor for two dancers,” Wendy said, “if you’re done trying to fix *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*.”

“I didn’t see it,” Janet said. “The reviews were bad.”

“You’re a stronger woman than I,” Elizabeth lamented.

“The name is trying too hard, though,” Janet said. “He wouldn’t have his own themed nickname. Wouldn’t it make more sense for him to go by his normal name instead of a nickname, to show how different he is from Indy?”

“Yeah, that would be better,” Wendy agreed. “But don’t tell me you can’t see Quaid in the role.”

“He’d be good,” Janet conceded. “As...John Jones.”

“That’s a comic book character,” Elizabeth said. “Jack Jones?”

Janet clenched her fist loosely. "I hate it when heroes are named Jack; it's so uncreative."

"And John isn't?"

"John owns it, at least."

"What about Tom Jones?" Wendy suggested.

Both Elizabeth and Janet turned to look at her. "It's taken."

"By who?"

"Are you kidding me right now?"

"Janet," Wendy said seriously, extending her hand. "C'mon. Dance up on me."

Janet reluctantly got to her feet. "She's young," she said apologetically to Elizabeth.

"And what am I, Methuselah? If you don't dance with her, I just may. And who knows where that could end up?"

"We're not having a threesome," Janet said.

"Don't say that until your anniversary is coming up."

"I am very hard to shop for," Wendy admitted.

Janet went to her, letting Wendy teasingly brush up against her in invitation, then embraced Wendy, winding them around in a slow, loose circle. Wendy rested her chin on Janet's shoulder and sighed lovingly.

Elizabeth watched them, and she must've been doing it harder than she realized, because Janet looked up at her. "So Elizabeth, seeing anyone?"

"Always," Elizabeth replied, stretching out on the empty couch with her arms to either side and her feet up on the coffee table.

"A lot?"

"I do have two eyes."

"Oh!" Wendy realized. "Are you telling her about—"

"I was getting to it," Janet said.

"Getting to what?" Elizabeth asked suspiciously.

"Well, if you have any openings in your busy schedule," Janet said dryly, "we know a girl who would be just perfect for you..."

"Uh-huh. Is this like a relationship thing or are you pimping me out?"

"She got out of a pretty serious relationship about five months ago, she's ready to start dating again, she's been to dinner a few times but nothing's clicked..."

Wendy took over. "Why not see if you can find her click?"

“I’d rather you were pimping me out. The whole disgustingly-in-love thing, that’s not for me.”

“Oh, are we disgusting you?” Wendy asked, teasingly smacking her lips against Janet’s cheek.

“Yes. You’re so gay for each other it’s making me homophobic. *Me.*” Elizabeth stood. “I’m going to leave you to your dirty dancing. I have to go make passionate love to someone.”

“Anyone in particular?” Wendy asked.

“What am I, psychic? The clubs aren’t closed yet, and if I hurry—or if I don’t—I can find some companionship for the night. Free-range, thank you very much.”

“People really go to clubs in their thirties?” Wendy asked. “Janet, did you go to clubs in your thirties? That’s crazy. We could’ve been like a weird college fling thing.”

“I’m not *in* my thirties. I’m *thirty*,” Elizabeth insisted. “There’s a difference. And can the women who had a quickie on corporate property please not imply I’m too old for casual sex?”

“Not too old,” Janet said quickly, breaking away from Wendy. “But as your twenties go on, it is somewhat natural to age out of the whole clubbing scene. You find someone, you make a serious go at it, maybe it works out, maybe it doesn’t—if it doesn’t, you try again...”

“If you had parents like mine, you’d know it’s not that simple.” Elizabeth shook her head. “No thanks. I plan on aging so well I’m still getting swiped-left-on at fifty.”

Wendy shrugged. “Admittedly, it’s not a bad plan.”

“There, you see?” Elizabeth asked. “Out of the mouths of babes...”

“I think Janet’s a babe, too,” Wendy said.

“I’m outie,” Elizabeth said.

“Go figure out if people still say ‘I’m outie’ in 2017!” Wendy called after her.

\* \* \*

Wendy may have found most of the gay bars in town too loud, too physical, too obtuse, but Elizabeth loved the *life* of them. The music was always playing, people were always hooking up, dancing, talking so loud

over the music that they had to shout. She loved how unapologetic it was. You stepped into a club like that and it was like no one was afraid.

She hadn't figured on how bad traffic would be and how long movie night would run—Wendy had successfully argued for them to watch both the original *and* the remake—so she went with a somewhat couture clubbing outfit. She'd removed her blouse and bra, put on her black leather jacket, and zipped it up over herself, but not so far that anyone couldn't tell what she was doing. It got her some appreciative looks, some modest interest, people intrigued enough to want to find out if she was a psycho or not. Her dancing did the rest.

Pretty soon, someone put out bait. A waiter stopped by with a vodka martini and directions to the table of who had sent it. Drink in hand, Elizabeth followed them.

The girl was beautiful. Not much on display, but a cute, studiously ripped blouse and riot grrrl skirt that were intriguing enough to promise more. A flannel jacket was wrapped around her waist. Black hair with a dyed lock of violet, a cutesy-goth skull tattooed over her collarbone, not twenty, not thirty, maybe twenty-five.

Elizabeth leaned against her table, toasting with the martini.

She said her name was Felicia. Felicia.

"Hi, Felicia, I'm Elizabeth. Just thought I'd let you know, we're going to be having sex tonight."

Elizabeth didn't have the connoisseur's love of the game, as she dubbed it, the fetish for painstaking seduction by degrees. The way she dressed, walked, talked—she knew she laid it all on the table. People had to either take her or leave her, and she was always impatient to know which was which.

Felicia's eyes widened with surprise, then shifted to amusement. She let out a charmed little giggle, and at that point, Elizabeth knew she wasn't going to be a liar.

"That's presumptuous," Felicia said, like someone laughing at a black joke while saying "that's so wrong." They just had to have an objection on the record.

"Well, then you're going to love this. I don't do relationships, and I'll probably be gone by the time you wake up."

Felicia twisted her own martini on the tabletop. “I’ll try not to fall in love with you.”

“I’ll settle for perverse lust.”

They talked, each taking the other’s “Introduction to” course. Elizabeth paid attention, but the words weren’t so important as the body language, Felicia picking up everything Elizabeth dropped. The way she watched as Elizabeth toyed with her olive on its toothpick, teasing biting into it before she finally did. Dipping the second olive into Felicia’s drink and stirring it around. Watching the way Felicia drank after that, like she’d just come through a desert.

They talked more; they danced. There was no touching, then some touching, then one kiss, then more kisses. Elizabeth relished it, even if she knew she was asking a question that had been answered the moment Felicia laid eyes on her.

They went back to Felicia’s apartment. Elizabeth remembered kissing her in the doorway, letting Felicia suck at her neck while she looked inside for any last-minute signs of crazy, then it was just a haze of pleasure, little moments standing out like jewels.

When she had her hand on Felicia’s side and as her grip shifted with Felicia’s heaving body, her thumb unexpectedly grazed the hardness of a rib in her soft belly.

The wicked little moment when an irritating strand of hair had fallen between their lips and Elizabeth had vexingly tugged at it before circling it back behind Felicia’s ear and kissing her sorry.

The loose, downy ride of her fingers between Felicia’s legs, all open and needing of her, then the pulse of Felicia clenching and knowing that she’d come—Felicia had come for her.

Then Elizabeth had guided her down to the mattress and surged up to straddle her face and Felicia had wound her hands over Elizabeth’s hips, her buttocks, the small of her back, searching for a place to put them that was as perfect as her tongue in Elizabeth’s cunt.

Elizabeth could tell she’d been wanting to do that since she’d bought the damn martini.

In the morning, Felicia woke up while Elizabeth was collecting her clothes. Freshly showered, Elizabeth wore her bra, her panties, and the warm water on her skin, and knew that to be such an overpowering combination

that she struck a nice pose. “Did I wake you?” she asked, knowing she hadn’t made a sound.

“You did a lot of things, but I hope you don’t think I could’ve slept through any of them.” Felicia sat up, noticing Elizabeth working herself into her pants. “Are you leaving?”

“Personal policy,” Elizabeth explained. “I hate the whole ‘hey, I slept over, now what, do we go again, do we get breakfast, do we hang out, do I have plans, do you have plans, do you wanna go bowling with me because it’s league night?’ So I always jet first thing in the morning. Nothing personal.”

Felicia absorbed that a moment before laughing. “So I guess that officially makes me one of your conquests, then?”

“Don’t worry about it.” Elizabeth left the flaps over her panties unzipped as she rummaged for her top. She’d stuffed it into a pocket like a hanky, but it’d come out somewhere... “I’m like the British Empire. Everyone’s been conquered by me at one point or another.”

“The Empire has a sexier accent.”

“You’ve got me there.” Elizabeth began checking under the furniture. “I used your shower, by the way. You really have great shampoos. I only used a squirt, but I was wondering how come your skin was so soft and your hair had so much volume, all that girly stuff. I thought you bathed in Evian water or something. Turns out you just don’t fuck around when it comes to body wash.”

“Looking for this?” Felicia drew a thin top out from underneath her pillow. “You gagged me with it.”

“You were very loud,” Elizabeth said, coming over to take it.

Felicia didn’t let go. “Thanks. For being so understanding.”

“Understanding?” Elizabeth asked.

“Yeah. It’s not like either of us were looking for the mother of our cat.” Felicia let go of the shirt. “Besides, I have a girlfriend.”

“Oh.” Elizabeth danced between her jacket and her top to get both on. It worked about as well as it did at distracting herself. “That’s some interesting pillow talk.”

“It’s not an exclusive relationship, obviously, but she wouldn’t love it if some girl were texting me and hitting me up and everything. Much better to just have the stress relief and then get back to it, like any weekend thing.”

“Yeah, yeah, exactly,” Elizabeth agreed half-heartedly. With both her layers on, she fixed her hair. “So you and her, you’re pretty serious?”

## FACE IT

Felicia flopped down on her pillow. “God, yeah. Crazy serious. Pretty soon, we’ll probably be trying the whole moving in together thing. She’s getting her eggs frozen, so if you have any idea what *that* means—”

“Thankfully, no. Good that you have someone, I guess. On not just a daily basis, I mean.”

“More like nightly.” Felicia grinned. “Hey, do you know any good sales going on under the radar? Penn’s birthday is coming up, so if something cute like those pumps is half off, I wanna know about it.”

“These?” Elizabeth asked, looking down at her shoes.

“Yeah. Penn would look great in those.”

“Her name is Penn?”

“Yes.”

“First name?”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing,” Elizabeth said quickly. “Is it short for something?”

“No.”

“Is she, like, Russian?”

“No.”

“Okay, I’m just going to assume she’s changed her name to avoid the Mob. Good luck with the shopping, and thank you for the lovely evening. I was terrific.”

“You mean *I* was terrific?”

“Fishing for compliments?” Elizabeth asked. She backed toward the door with a smile she knew Felicia would find even more charming for how insolent it was. “You were great. We should do this again sometime, if you’re still dating someone else. Next time, we can skip that whole confusing part where we want to have sex but I’m wearing pants.”

\* \* \*

The days had become short, overcast, shadows devouring all of the city that they could and touching all they couldn’t. A cold snap had come in as well, driving rain from the gray skies. Just an insubstantial drizzle, which actually proved more annoying than the sleet it clearly wished to be. If Elizabeth were well and truly soaked, at least there’d be some consistency—it was the inconstant noncommittal that stung her.

Her phone rang and she ducked inside a bus shelter, the back advertising next year’s summer blockbusters. Someone named “The Red Bee” glared

dramatically at her and Elizabeth thought, *Oh, hell, they ran out of real superheroes to do*. She pulled her collar up to her cheeks, folded the hem of her coat over her legs, and when she looked at the screen of her phone it was like she couldn't figure out how that name and that face had gotten there. The phone rang and rang and almost went to voice-mail before she stopped trying to figure out how the past could dial her number. She answered.

"Elizabeth! Been a while!"

Michelle's voice was like light through parted clouds, the moon at mid-day. It was bright and friendly and full of cheer, like they were just their surfaces. The photos cheek to cheek, the texts with smiley faces, the hugs—Michelle's hand in hers, but she couldn't run her thumb along it, couldn't squeeze too tight, couldn't do anything or it would shatter.

She sounded like they had never been anything other than friends, but Elizabeth could remember the temperature of the skin under her bra and the taste of the sweat below her waist. It wasn't in Michelle's voice, not at all, but she could remember every detail. And that made the whole recollection feel stolen.

Which made Elizabeth feel guilty. "Michelle. Hi!" She cringed her way toward something to say and never got there. "Hi."

"I told you I might come to New York one of these days, remember? Well, a few dozen things all came together and I thought, maybe it's a sign from the universe, maybe I should just say to hell with it... Anyway, I'm coming in on the twelve o'clock flight."

"That's great!" Elizabeth enthused, although she couldn't quite specify *how*. "Need me to vouch for you so they let you in?"

"Not this time. Actually, I was just wondering if you could do me a big favor and pick me up? I'm probably going to spring for a rental car, but I just can't fuss with that now. You mind?"

"No, no, course not. In fact, I've had some plans fall through, so how about we make a day of it?" The lie felt like a tone-deaf note in a song that wasn't good to begin with, but Michelle forgave it.

"I'd love it! Just don't go to any trouble?"

"No trouble at all for a friend."

Michelle's voice was as sweet as unfamiliar candy on Halloween, the kind you got trick-or-treating, only once a year. "We're more than friends, Liz, we're sisters."

## Chapter 2

ON THE RIDE OVER, THE shower stopped threatening and just came down, a pitter-patter of fattened droplets that egged the windshield before being swiped away. From the backseat, Elizabeth stared out the window, watching the hash that the watery splatter made out of the world as the wind massaged it across the glass. Everything was fuzzy, rising and falling along the streaks of the rain.

The one that got away. Didn't that used to have something to do with fishing? Really, Elizabeth felt more like some retired cop, too old for this shit, who was haunted by one unsolved case. A crate of evidence that should long since have fallen out of her purview, but that she still kept fastidiously arranged in some secret corner of herself, to be taken out and puzzled over when the night got too long and her mind got too comfortable.

What did Michelle feel for her after all this time, and in what possible world could anything come of it? Was there a world where she meant to Michelle what Michelle meant to her? And how could she get there, if the way hadn't already been blocked a hundred times over by her bullshit, Michelle's bullshit, other relationships, old foolishness, bad choices?

An unrequited love like that couldn't go bad, but after so long, it did sour. It could be more like an open wound sometimes. She'd been cut by the thought of them together and never been able to bandage it with reality. And so it just bled and bled. And like a cut on the inside of her mouth, a loose tooth, she couldn't stop tonguing it, no matter how it stung.

The rain stopped as they tucked into the airport, prowling the circulatory roadway that confused all invaders into submission. Her driver made three passes at the terminal, Elizabeth lowering her window to let in the drowsy

din of the world after rainfall, the stop and go of traffic with pedestrians in badly choreographed dance, the smell of the rain and its taste of ozone. And the clouds finally parted and the sun came out and there was Michelle.

She had always been tall, always been slender—the years had hardly touched her, cocooned as she'd been in a good marriage, with a wealthy husband. She'd traded flats for heels, adopted a blonde-again hairstyle that suited a slightly narrower face—a *nosejob*? Elizabeth wondered. Couldn't be. For all her Irish pride, her face had trended toward the Nordic branch of her family tree: fine cheekbones, tiny nose, and a jaw that came to a petite point. Any freckles she'd once had must've given way like snow before ice.

The added height made her appear thinner, maybe more ephemeral, although that was countered by layers of fine clothing. A linen pantsuit, a glossy leather overcoat with frilly furred shoulders, a black-banded fedora with a razor of a brim, a ribbon of narrow scarf—they all wrapped around her like gauze. Her earrings even flashed like the sheen of some translucent shield around her. The ring on her finger was brighter even than the glow in her eyes.

They hugged, gave pleasantries back and forth, loaded luggage into the car's trunk, and then there was the jetlagged realization, as Michelle slammed the rear door shut, that she was looking at a shiny Lincoln badge.

“Oh my God, Elizabeth! You drive a town car?”

Elizabeth patted her arm. The touch was like a charge of static electricity, stinging and gratifying all at once. The hug, the pat—she never quite learned how warm Michelle was, and she kept chiding herself for wanting to know. “It's New York, hon. I don't *drive*. But my boss has a car service, and all the drivers are desperately in love with me, so they do me favors now and then.”

Michelle gave her a square look. Looks like those always made Elizabeth worry that she knew—that she couldn't not *know*. “You big slut!”

“I slept with two of them,” Elizabeth said defensively. “And they were both cute.”

“The backseat's that big? This I have to see.” Michelle came around to the driver's side.

Elizabeth forced herself to wait, to stay back until Michelle was settled before she climbed in after her.

The car whispered off, silent and smooth.

## FACE IT

“You’re one to talk,” Elizabeth said. “You big gold digger. Don’t tell me this is the first town car you’ve seen.”

Michelle flexed her fist, as if testing the weight her wedding ring put on her fingers. “Hard to see the road from the kitchen. My husband, William, he has a very old-fashioned idea of marriage. Not only ‘til death do you part,’ but counting the seconds.”

Part of Elizabeth refused to believe Michelle could make such a bad match. It tried to shout down the part that rejoiced at Michelle testing the resistance of her ring to moving up and down her finger. “He can’t be all that bad—”

“No. Just bad for me.” Michelle smiled and reached out, patting Elizabeth’s shoulder, her touch warm, the ring cold. “I don’t want to talk about it. It’s private. Let’s just—I know—let’s go to Coney Island, like we used to. It hasn’t sunk or anything, has it?”

“No, they voted against that.”

“Good. That’s excellent.” Michelle shook her head. “Just like the good old days, huh? See what’s still standing, make our way home on the Stillwell Avenue El.”

Elizabeth smiled at the thought; the old cave had always struck her and Michelle as borderline depressing, but in a melancholy way fitting to ending a day in Wonderland. The rumbling train gave the perfect half-asleep haze to be picked up with, when they’d met their boyfriends for a car ride. Or, once, Elizabeth’s girlfriend.

How were things supposed to stay the same from there?

“God.” Elizabeth giggled; not too hysterical, she thought. “I don’t even know if that...supervillain hideout is still standing!”

“One way to find out.” Michelle hauled her phone from her pocket and Elizabeth had barely registered the threat of it before she was being pulled into half of a hug. “PS, selfie!”

She still didn’t know how warm Michelle was, but she kept getting hints.

\* \* \*

Being with Michelle felt like cheating on your diet, like one drink more than ‘had enough,’ like those hours awake snatched from the sleep you needed the day before something important. It was bad, but it was so good.

And at least Elizabeth remembered why she kept obsessing on every mile of the distance between her and Michelle.

Because it was worth knowing, by God.

For nostalgia's sake, Elizabeth had the driver let them off under the Brighton Street station, the El above casting circuit board patterns down out of the rails and ties. Elizabeth saw where Mrs. Stahl's had been, her knishes a reward for the long train ride there, the prospect making them hungry even if they'd eaten before riding—there was a pharmacy there now. She thought of pointing it out to Michelle, but she didn't.

"This is going to sound crazy," Michelle said as they walked south, through the brownstones that were jumbled every so often to a new community and now had Russians, with the next jumble looking to come up Central Asian; obi non and samsa joining borscht and blini. Of course, if Elizabeth was remembering her history, the borscht and blini had only gotten here in the seventies. Funny, how the things that were there when you were a kid seemed to be forever.

"I bet it's not," Elizabeth replied, passing a caged tree, autumn leaves flaring with color as they died. "Nothing you say could sound crazy if you tried. You make everything sound so reasonable."

Michelle briefly let a smile live before euthanizing it. "I will test that. These past few years, I've felt your presence—your energy, almost. Like you're with me, sometimes. Is that crazy?"

"Still not crazy," Elizabeth said. "We've known each other a long time. When you know someone a long time, they become a part of you."

"Mm," Michelle considered. "Maybe it's a psychic thing. I just felt you thinking of me, the way you can tell who's calling you before you pick up the phone."

"Oh, you have caller ID?"

Again, the smile and its half-life. "Have you been thinking of me?"

"I think about everything," Elizabeth demurred. "I take lots of baths."

She must've looked stricken enough for Michelle to be merciful, or twist the blade. Hard to tell sometimes. "Is that a personal question?" she asked.

They passed a group exchanging the throaty Klingon of Russian over chess. Elizabeth asked, "You think we should thank anyone here for electing Trump?"

## FACE IT

\* \* \*

Michelle was a drug that Elizabeth took every time she thought of her, every time she sucked at a memory like it was hard candy, every time she wondered what was lurking under those memories and what she had thoughtlessly painted over by never telling Michelle how she felt. And the drug only kicked in when she saw Michelle smile and didn't know how those lips could possibly have stopped kissing hers.

They passed the brownstones and the nursing homes and the old people who put themselves out in the sun while defending themselves against it, heavy clothes and umbrellas that wavered in the wind like party balloons. Stopped to eat at Cafe Tatiana, which sat on the Boardwalk and let the wind off the ocean get a clear shot at them. Michelle ordered what amounted to a very pretentious salad, while Elizabeth felt compelled to see what beef tongue tasted like.

The food arrived quickly and had that spice that only came from food served somewhere that seemed a little sketchy: paper plates, menus that weren't laminated, and napkins that were in plastic wrap instead of a dispenser. A waiter in a tuxedo slightly cheaper than that of a Chippendales dancer eyed them now and then, either to make sure they were eating or that they weren't stealing the napkins.

They were alone in the restaurant except for sets of domino players occupying the back tables, their moves sounding like an old-fashioned cash register, or a hip-hop song that never launched into verse.

"I was just thinking," Michelle said, a new smile just held in check by her moving lips, "that in the old days, you would've dared *me* to order beef tongue."

"What, and let you have it all to yourself?" Elizabeth took a bite. "I can't believe I'm at first base with a cow."

"Well, you did date Suzie Dinkins..."

"Hey, she was nice."

"Yeah, I'm a jerk."

Michelle looked out over the wood planks of the Boardwalk to the ocean, its blue sharpened by the cold until Elizabeth thought of the rime scent as the sea cutting all the way to them. Sunlight mixed like paint with the yellowing sand, making it an almost gray.

“I remember when you dared me to try Ukrainian borscht. *Ukrainian borscht!*”

“Sounds like the opposite of a porn name,” Elizabeth commiserated, already smiling at the memory.

“I just wanted to get chicken noodles, because I knew I would like chicken noodles. You said no, this is Little Russia, we should try something—”

“A little Russian,” Elizabeth recalled. “You liked it, too.”

“I did! I ordered it ever since. Now look at me, I haven’t had it in years...”

Elizabeth looked out to sea and watched the Polar Bear Club’s diet suicide, daredevils plunging into the waves in swim trunks, seeing if the waters were cold enough to keep them. Elizabeth couldn’t sympathize one bit, because she was feeling the exact opposite.

*You know hypothermia feels warm*, some scumbag voice inside her whispered.

“Of course, it’s actually called Little Odessa,” Elizabeth said, and let anything unpleasant in the conversation dissolve like salt into water.

\* \* \*

Meal finished, check paid, and tip handed over, they walked the Riegelmann Boardwalk. Hurricane Sandy had delivered a finishing blow to the iconic wood, so the city had decided to let the future have its way. Concrete, plastic, and an insult of wood had replaced the famous planks. It looked less like the Boardwalk and more like a pattern of linoleum. Underneath, the “Hotel Underwood” where they’d changed clothes and fooled around with boys had been filled in, fenced off.

One step onto the new thing and Elizabeth could feel the difference. The old wood had had character. You got a literal spring in your step just walking on it. This new synthetic blend of low-fat, non-dairy, glucose-free Boardwalk was like walking through a foot of mud in comparison. Elizabeth and Michelle traded rueful chuckles as they tried to make the best of it, pretended their footsteps could ever sound the same as when they were long-legged girls in Keds.

“I guess I think about my youth more than you specifically,” Elizabeth said, her voice going along with her footfalls and sounding tinny, unnatural. “What’s still there, what’s faded...”

“What has faded?” Michelle pressed.

“The things that aren’t important.”

“Me?” Oddly, Michelle was better able to smile now. It seemed like less of a distance for her lips to travel.

“Some of you,” Elizabeth said noncommittally, wishing she could remember what Michelle had been to her and forget what she could’ve been.

“And is any of it coming back?”

“All of it.” Elizabeth smiled slightly. “You never went home, when you could. You always came here, with me. I almost thought it was because of me.”

Michelle squinted. “It was everything. It was you, it was the city.”

“No, you just liked the city. Even then. You would’ve slept on the streets if they’d let you.”

“It beat Ohio,” Michelle said simply.

Out past the breakers, the workhorses of the sea went about their duties. Tankers, tugs, trawlers. Elizabeth remembered as a kid, she’d once sat on a bench and spent a whole hour watching a luxury liner sail out into the Atlantic. Lifestyles of the rich and famous. Now it seemed nobody was rich and everyone was famous.

In the shade of two monolithic condominiums that looked as if they’d been imported from the Soviet Union along with the immigrant population, they moved from Brighton Beach to Coney Island. There, the New York Aquarium waited for them where her parents had visited the burnt down Dreamland.

When Elizabeth first saw it, construction vehicles arranged like anti-feng-shui to the smoothly flowing lines of its buildings, she thought the whole place was being torn down. One more casualty in time’s war on everything that didn’t suck about the past. Then she realized the building they were hacking at in union slow-motion was being constructed, not demolished, and remembered that the place was having an exhibit added.

*Not all bad, Smile. It’s not all bad.*

She and Michelle bought their tickets and went inside. They went through Glover’s Reef and the Coral Triangle and the Great Lakes of Africa, with the lights down low and the water bright so it felt not like they were

going from one fish tank to another, but like they were in a hall carved out of the sea.

Her memories of the fish had all run together, blurred with Animal Planet and the Discovery Channel, but she could still recall looking at Michelle and her wonder over all the different *kinds*. How impressed she was that it wasn't just the same species everywhere it was wet, but different ones in different parts of the ocean, different lakes, different rivers.

"Why are you staring at me?" Michelle asked, backlit by Brazil's Flooded Forests.

"Sorry." Elizabeth redirected her attention to the fish and their constant impromptu dance. "You just used to make the funniest faces, gawking at all the little fishies."

"I did?" Michelle looked at the aquarium, too, though she seemed more focused on her reflection in the glass. "I suppose I was a little obsessed. But...they're just fish."

"Yeah, not a lot of breakthroughs in the field recently." Elizabeth turned, leaning back against the railing and facing Michelle sidelong. "It's kinda funny. How we have these phases when we're young where something is our whole life, and then it just wears off. Now if I get interested in something, I'm actually into it. No more do-overs left, I guess."

Michelle drummed her hands on the railing. "Now I remember! You used to love volcanoes. Only thing we could agree on was those underwater volcanoes in Hawaii, with all the weird fish that lived around them—"

"Hydrothermal vents," Elizabeth remembered. "All those weird tube worms and the fish without eyes—or were those in caves?"

"I think caves."

"God, I barely remember any of that..." Elizabeth tightened one hand into a fist, palming it with her other hand repeatedly. "Three kinds of volcanoes. Shield volcano, which is just like a lava leak—that's the kind the guy hit with his plow. Then there's the cone volcano, which is just—"

"A volcano," Michelle supplied helpfully.

"And then there's the, uh, the Mount St. Helens one. All the pressure just builds up and builds up and then it blows all at once." Elizabeth's eyebrows wagged. She couldn't remember the name, but that'd been her favorite.

"We should've gone to a volcano museum," Michelle observed dryly.

## FACE IT

“They don’t have those in New York. Tectonics are more of a West Coast thing.”

Michelle turned, leaning one side against the railing to face Elizabeth. “Well, since the only interest either of us has in fish is grilling them—”

“Which is frowned upon here.”

“What do you say we move on?”

“Your wish is my command.”

\* \* \*

Out past the Wonder Wheel and Astroland, the Cyclone and the new Thunderbolt, none of them open, some of them dead. Steeplechase Pier waited for them, extending out for a thousand feet like it was trying to make an escape. They walked out over the crashing waves, safe from all but the mist that sprayed up to haze the air. Maybe Elizabeth was just tired from all the walking, but it seemed to pass some scent test for nostalgia. The fishermen trying their luck could’ve been there since her teens. The benches along the sides could’ve still been warm from her sitting down for a rest. The soulless plastic surgery of the Boardwalk to the east seemed to be holding off, letting the pier age gracefully. Or maybe she had just gotten used to it. You could get used to most anything.

They sat down on a bench and Elizabeth closed her eyes, feeling the wind off the ocean, the foam in the air, the smell of the sea. They could’ve been on the prow of a ship sailing for the horizon.

“Herring season,” she said. “That’s what this is. My dad used to fish all day while I ran up and down the Boardwalk. He’d probably get a social worker called on him these days. Not keeping me safe from all the rapists and terrorists and CHUDs...”

Elizabeth looked back toward land. The Parachute Jump stood watch, a towering array of steel that looked like a lighthouse’s skeleton. It’d been closed even when she was a kid, though she’d heard a rumor that only adults were allowed to ride it. Now here she was, and it turned out no one could, not kid or big kid or grown-up.

“You know William Bridger, my husband?” Michelle was fiddling with her ring finger. She had on gloves, but Elizabeth guessed she could feel her ring through it. “I actually went after him, you know. Isn’t that embarrassing? He loved these old, old bookstores, the ones you only see

on Instagram—the one man in America without an Amazon account—so I asked to go with him. And we just browsed through the bookstore, talking and showing each other books and putting them in our little baskets. He got me this really nice hardcover of *One Thousand and One Nights*. Real expensive. That’s how I knew it was a date. Our first date.”

Elizabeth looked out at a herring gull, one of the few not huddled together for warmth, as it flew against the wind, gliding so steadily it was barely moving at all. “You’re getting a divorce.”

“Yeah,” Michelle said. “How’d you know?”

“People don’t sound that sad when they’re talking about going out with their husband for the first time. Not if they’re staying married.”

“No,” Michelle agreed.

Elizabeth had had so much planned. A walk past the Shorefront Jewish Geriatric Center, which had once been the Half-Moon Hotel—telling Michelle the story of how Abe Reyes, chief witness in the case against Murder Inc., had taken a header out the window in 1941, despite five of New York’s Finest guarding him. Getting a pair of hot dogs from Nathan’s Famous and seeing how much they cost now. Maybe sneak into the ruins of Childs’ Restaurant, which had been a restaurant and then a candy factory and then nothing.

*What are you trying to prove?* she asked herself. A trip down memory lane was one thing, but she was pacing through it, back and forth, like she was measuring it for something. Bad mood or not, she had no call to make everything about their old relationship when it was so clearly about *this*.

“He’s cheating on me.” Michelle squinted as if she could see him doing it.

“He’s crazy.”

“Well, they’re young and they dance and they have nice clothes. They’re just not interesting.” Michelle smiled, and Elizabeth could see why she hadn’t before. It just looked like teeth—the grimace of a skull more than a curve of her lips. “So I guess he’d be crazy not to. How does it go? In an insane world, the insane man appears sane?”

“Well, you have a prenupe, right? Some private eye with pictures of him in a motel?”

“I’ve got nothing, Liz. Nothing except you. Can we get out of here? It’s cold. I wanna be somewhere warm.”

“I know just the place.”

## FACE IT

\* \* \*

Giving into the impossibility of continuing the hike, even in flats, they hailed a taxi and took it through the eyesore of Trump Village—the obnoxiousness of neon but in red-brick, though Elizabeth allowed that she was probably projecting. She watched to make sure the cabbie didn't take any shortcuts that would add a decimal place to the fare, but felt Michelle's eyes on her. They came to a stop at the Siren Lounge, close enough to the El for it to knock your hat off, and loud enough to make the El a whisper.

They approached the front door, Elizabeth surprised to find it closed instead of propped open and gushing out beats. She wasn't even able to check to see if it was locked before the owner, Mr. Diktovich, opened it up and told them it was closed. He had owned the place since before they could afford to eat there, and age had whitened his hair but not really changed his looks—he had always looked more hewn from wood than grown from an infant. He wore a baggy leather coat, leather holsters on his belt for every conceivable cargo right down to his keys, and a T-shirt that had faded so much it looked like it was something in a time-travel movie being erased from the continuum.

“C'mon, Mr. D, it's us! Lizzie and Mickey? You can't be closed, it's barely six o'clock.”

“Six o'clock. Private function. We close early.” Diktovich always spoke begrudgingly. He attended to everything as if it were a stubborn plumbing problem, even the club scene, which Elizabeth thought made the place tolerable. She'd dated enough club promoters to consider the very profession a warning sign in a relationship, like drinking before noon or pronouncing gif with a J.

“But we need to do some karaoke,” Michelle pleaded. “*Need to!*”

“And I'm hungry,” Elizabeth added with a small pout.

“I have leftover food to throw out. I was going to give it to the homeless, but if you want it...” Diktovich's words trailed off.

“Oh, yeah, definitely,” Elizabeth answered.

The El came in overhead, dragging nails across a chalkboard as they ate. “I think I'd even like modern music better than that,” Michelle said.

“What, you're telling me you don't like Maroon 5?” Elizabeth asked. “Philistine.”

“Music was better when we were kids. It just was.”

“‘When we were kids?’ You’re thirty.”

“Takes one to know one. Are there any other karaoke bars around here?”

“I’m shamed that you think I’m the kind of person that knows about more than one karaoke bar.”

“All right then. We’re doing guerrilla karaoke.”

Michelle handed her take-out carton to Elizabeth, forcing her to look for somewhere to set it down where it’d be invulnerable to foot traffic. Michelle stood before her on the sidewalk.

“I will now,” Michelle said, “perform every single word of Christina Aguilera’s seminal 1999 hit, ‘Genie in a Bottle.’”

“Wow, I had no idea it was eleven years old.”

Michelle launched into the chorus like she was in an episode of Glee or something.

“Uh-uh, no fair starting with the chorus,” Elizabeth interrupted her. “Also, you’re embarrassing yourself.”

“You live here, I’m embarrassing you,” Michelle said in a quick aside, then kept going.

Elizabeth waited for some cop or someone to tell Michelle to knock it off; didn’t you need a license to be a busker? The longer she waited, the harder it got not to think that this was the girl she’d fallen in love with ten years ago. And that it had been love.

\* \* \*

Michelle sang in the shower. Not that Elizabeth was really listening to her. Wrong sense.

*A gentle rain of water on bare flesh, pattering off the creamy skin it met to become a mist that was half-steam, half-aura. The roving cascade of the water down perfectly formed curves, catching the overhead light of the shower stall and reflecting it in a shining tattoo that pulled the eye in. Even the shower door was an erotic taboo, smeared with a glossy patina of condensation, one last layer between her and Michelle, penetrated only by the outline of Michelle’s shapely body and her eyes, cool and receptive, with an underlying excitement, welcoming and daring Elizabeth to throw open the door that muted everything, the sound of the shower and the sight of Michelle and most especially her feel, and then, with it out of the way...*

*You are such a creeper, Smile*, Elizabeth thought, trying to shake the image from her head. You'd think it'd be easy to do, since it was all in her imagination. Well, there *was* a very naked, very musical Michelle one room over, but that might as well have been a million miles away.

Who thinks about their friends naked? Creepers, that's who. You shouldn't think about anyone naked. Okay, that's unreasonable, but who thinks about someone they know naked? No one. You don't think about anyone you're even friends with on Facebook; you just think about Jessica Alba. Unless you meet Jessica Alba and get to know her and she asks to use your shower because she's staying in your apartment and it's New York just before Thanksgiving and even Jesus's manger has probably been auctioned off on Airbnb.

"You're thinking too much," Elizabeth told herself, pulling out her phone in the famed twenty-first-century answer to all existential dilemmas. "Next thing you know, I'll be turning into Wendy, asking someone to spank me—"

"What was that?" Michelle asked, coming out of the bathroom.

Elizabeth knew her fantasy life was getting too rich when she could do an imagine spot right through Michelle turning off the shower, drying herself, and dressing—even if she hadn't dressed much. A T-shirt. Panties. No bra. Not that Elizabeth noticed. That would be creepy. She just didn't *not* notice.

"Nothing!" Elizabeth said quickly.

"Because it sounded like you were asking someone to spank you." Michelle glanced at Elizabeth's phone. "Is there an app for that?"

"There *is*, but I'm not using it. And I'm just assuming it exists."

"Hey, no judging." Michelle sat down on the opposite side of the bed. Elizabeth could see her legs from the full, warm thighs that settled into the bedspread to the tapering sculptures that fell over the edge. "My husband wouldn't like it if he knew I was standing around in my panties with some strange guy."

"I'm not a guy," Elizabeth pointed out.

"You are an...interested party, though. Right?" Michelle opened her purse—she'd left it on the bed like some deliberate taunt—and took out a pocket comb to run through her hair.

"Well, I was straight, then I was gay, now I'm pan." Elizabeth winced. "Or, you know, a version of that that doesn't sound like I'm a Pokémon evolving or something."

“So you’re bisexual, then.”

“Pretty much,” Elizabeth conceded. “But relax. I don’t make passes at married women. Or married men. Fiancés in general...”

Michelle squinted at her. “Shouldn’t you ask how married they are first?”

She was teasing. Elizabeth had the distinct, not comfortable but not unpleasant feeling of being teased. Flirted with. *Seduced*. But then, she’d had that feeling with Michelle before, and it hadn’t panned out. “Panned out”—there was a phrase. Like panning for gold and only getting pyrite.

“How married are you?” Elizabeth asked.

“Just about as little as a woman can be with a ring on her finger.” Michelle leaned across the bed to Elizabeth, resting her weight on an outstretched arm, her breasts falling against her tight shirt and her nipples denting the fabric, her hair wet and dark and curling like a crooking finger. “Does that matter to you? The ring on my finger?”

“Why should it matter to me if it doesn’t matter to you?” Elizabeth asked. It was wrong; too-much-cotton-candy wrong, that oversweet taste that she knew would sicken her—but she could take being sick if it tasted this good first.

Michelle’s voice dipped with her as she laid back, drowning in the mattress as it sucked her down into the covers an inch or so, like it was trying to digest her, squeeze her *under* the covers where she belonged, but she was caught between its teeth.

“I have a proposition for you,” she said.

Elizabeth felt the muscles in her thighs twist and realized it was an urge to stand up, *not* to lie down beside Michelle, all panties and T-shirt and underneath—not to do what she’d just *done*. “I’m listening,” she said, because she had been for what felt like her entire life.

Michelle turned onto her side, looming over Elizabeth, who was now flat on her back. “William’s cheating on me. I can’t prove it, but he is. We have a prenup. With a no-fault divorce, he gets half of everything, half of *my* everything. But if there’s an incompatibility—something wrong from the get-go—then I can annul the marriage. He gets nothing.”

Elizabeth was staring out the corner of her eye at Michelle, trying to think, which was easier when she just stared up at the ceiling. Michelle was in bed with her—why was that such a big deal? They were just lying there, for God’s sake... “You mean if he were a bigamist or something.”

“Yes. Or if there was a sexual incompatibility.”

“Like he can only get it up if you dress like a sheep.”

“Like he’s a man...and I’m not into men.”

Elizabeth raised her head. She looked at Michelle and watched the slow, sure smile on her face. “But you *are*... I mean, it’s been a while since I checked, but you were leaning pretty hard the other direction.”

“I’m not talking about reality; I’m talking about legality. Say now that William and I are separated, I start seeing another woman. We go on dates, we post things online, we move in together eventually. It’s not like anyone’s going to ask us to make a sex tape. It’d be just like we were roommates.”

“And I’m the...beard?”

“You are out of the closet, if people still say that. If I go to one of my other friends, one of my straight friends, and ask her for this—and no one’s single anymore, but even if someone was—well, it’d be far more convincing with you. You do get around, Elizabeth. I’m not judging, I’m just *saying*...”

Elizabeth sat up, hanging her head over her knees. Jesus, what was this? She put her head in her hands. What the hell *was this*? Some kinda fucked up monkey-paw wish?

“It would just be until the divorce goes through,” Michelle said, putting a hand on Elizabeth’s back. “Then we just wait a little while, we break up, and I give you ten percent of all that alimony I’m not paying. Plus, while we’re living together, I could pay your rent. Get a few nice things around here to show you how much I appreciate—”

“Wait, just wait,” Elizabeth insisted, part of her wanting to get up and pace—her legs were *throbbing*—but part of her wanting to stay there, connected to Michelle by that hand on her back. “So, what, you’re just going to pretend to be a lesbian for the rest of your life? What happens when you meet some guy and—”

“Next year, my company’s promoting me to their Bolivian division. I’ll be down there for years. Assuming I meet someone—which I won’t, because I’ll be focusing on my career—who’s going to care? What’s William going to do, follow me to South America to make sure I’m only dating women? If I ever do come back, it’ll be years from now, and he’ll have moved on to bore some other woman to tears. Probably won’t even remember me. I don’t think he ever learned my middle name.”

GEORGETTE KAPLAN

“This is insane,” Elizabeth said, even with Michelle’s hand on her back. “We’re talking about—you’re talking about pretending to be a lesbian. To get a good divorce settlement. People die for really being what you’re going to pretend you are.”

“I’ll pay you twenty-five thousand dollars,” Michelle said.

“I’ll think about it.”

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# FACE IT

BY GEORGETTE KAPLAN

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