A grieving son, an ancient artifact...

With the chance to become a woman, would he make the same choice she had?
Part 1: The Black Dress

My hands shook as I lifted it from the hanger. The black dress that once belonged to my mother. It was mine now, along with everything else that was hers, now that she was gone. The lingerie and the jewelry, the makeup, the wigs, the shoes and all the rest of her clothes. A heavy price to pay for such treasure.

Just me now, in this little house on the edge of town. I wondered what I should do with it. Sell off this piece of my past and return to the city where I’d recently graduated, where I still had friends and contacts? Or live here, with all of Mom’s clothes and her wigs and her little black dress? And do what?

I could take it with me, of course, but it wouldn’t be the same. I’d never worn such things anywhere else, only here. Only in this house.

It wouldn’t be the same.

I lay the dress on the bed and unbuttoned my shirt.

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I think it started when I was six or seven years old, at Halloween. We’d already done the usual stuff kids do—a ghost, a cowboy, a Klingon, Donald Trump—and this time Mom wanted something different. She wanted me to be a witch.

I’m sure she didn’t tell me ahead of time. I probably wouldn’t have agreed. Even a very little boy knows it’s not right to wear something meant for a little girl. I must have objected. I must have made a fuss. But she insisted.

She’d bought or borrowed a black dress that fit me perfectly. It hung from the tiny training bra she made me wear, stuffed with a couple of small water balloons, and didn’t quite cover my knees. Black panty hose—who knew they came so small?—and shiny black dress flats. Mom’s old black purse, which doubled as a candy bag. Some simple makeup, a short strand of pearls, clip-on earrings. The only thing ‘witchy’ about my costume was the peaked hat. And the straw broom.

At least, that’s what I remember. You never know with old memories. Maybe I just want that story to be true. Maybe I’ve thought about it so much over the years, I’ve created the tale in all its particulars. Maybe I’m just trying to make sense of why I can’t stop wearing these damn clothes.

She told everyone I was a little witch. I definitely remember that. But even then she must have known. She must have known it was just an excuse to turn her son into a little girl. For that one night, I was the daughter she never had.

I also remember that she wore a black dress that night. Black hose, black heels and a black handbag. I wasn’t just her daughter that night—I was her.
I threw my clothes out into the hall as I undressed, then kicked them into my old room. I wouldn’t need them again. Certainly not tonight. Maybe not ever.

I hit the bathroom hard. A close shave with Dad’s old Philips electric, which had kept its customary spot on the counter ever since his own passing, ten short years ago. My own shaver was somewhere in the basement, packed in a box.

Then I switched to Mom’s Lady Remington, which I’d given her myself only last Christmas. I shaved my arms and legs, and underarms, plus what little there was on my chest. I trimmed my eyebrows, more so than usual. Then I slathered Veet over everything I’d just shaved, including my so-called beard area—in spite of the fact that the stuff wasn’t intended for the face. But a woman’s skin is more delicate than mine; I figured I could get away with it.

I stood in the tub—no shower, but with warm water pooling around my feet—and closed my eyes. It had all been so confusing.

I remember taking old skirts or blouses from the rag-bag, or from the stuff Mom had put aside for charity. I stashed them in the basement, way back under the stairs in an old suitcase. When I was alone, I’d try them on. God knows why.

Maybe I was thinking about that little girl at Halloween. Maybe I was thinking about the girls at school—how they could wear a skirt and nobody gave a damn, except in a good way. Maybe I was thinking about the brunette on Charlie’s Angels, with the kind of long hair I longed to feel flowing over my own shoulders.

Yeah, I was definitely thinking about her. I still do.

Whatever was going on in my little-boy brain, it was terribly exciting. Kind of like pretending to throw yourself off a cliff, only to grab a branch or a root at the last moment and stop yourself. That kind of excitement.

But I knew it was wrong. Oh yes, I knew it was wrong.

One time, I remember, the clothes disappeared—along with the old suitcase. I was in a serious panic, the kind where you think maybe the world is about to come to an end and you’re going to die, but no one ever mentioned it.

That kind of set the tone for what followed.

I felt dazed, entering the master bedroom. For the first time I need not fear that someone might come home unexpectedly. It had been lurking in the background for as long as I could remember, even when Mom was out of town overnight.
I opened the lingerie drawer and picked out an extra-firm full-figure body briefer, in basic black. Time to replace my shapeless form with something that could handle a dress. I sat to slip my now-smooth legs through the top, pulled it up and stuffed the crotch with a piece of foam padding that served to smooth things out and keep little “groundskeeper willie” under control.

Interesting thing, that. Years ago, I’d found the foam pad at the base of the lingerie drawer and wondered what it was for. I couldn’t figure out why Mom might need it—but what the hell, it fit and it was just the thing to improve my look. Later on, a couple more pieces showed up that were exactly the right size to pad out my hips to more womanly proportions. I did wonder about that.

With all three pads in place, I ran the straps over my shoulders and went to the closet. Top shelf, way back in one corner—there it was. I took the box down and opened it. There, cradled in a pair of smooth plastic bowls, were the breast forms I’d first found shortly after my eighteenth birthday, with Mom out of town visiting her sister for a whole week.

Did I wonder about that too? You bet I did, but by that time the cat was pretty much out of the bag. Mom was, without saying a word, feeding my habit. Sure, it felt weird, but who could resist such a gift?

Now, as then, I slipped the breast forms into the cups of the body briefer, tucking the side flap of each around the side. The backs were contoured to accept the bulge of my own undersize breasts, and coated with a self-adhesive layer to keep them in place. Silicone gel made them soft enough to yield like flesh to the touch, and firm enough to feel like part of my body.

I now know how expensive they must have been. But at the time, all I cared about was having a fully female chest. With breast forms and hip pads in place, the body briefer appeared to be hugging the figure of a mature woman. I added a silk slip—also in black, of course—and seated myself at Mom’s vanity.

In the soft glare of a dozen frosted bulbs, I studied my face. Boyishly handsome (or so I’m told) but without the hard angles and overall size of the typical male head. Small nose, prominent cheekbones and nearly perfect left-right symmetry; the basic recipe for a beautiful face. It wouldn’t take much.

I picked up a tube of foundation cream. It was all so familiar.

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I remember the first time I snuck into Mom’s room. It was after school, she was at work, and I’d finally decided to bypass the rag-bag and go straight to the source. Maybe it was just a skirt that time. Maybe it included some knee-high hose and a nice pair of shoes; two-inch heels with a wide base. Trainers, as it were.
Whatever the case, it only escalated after that. Mom had a good job, but not much control over her hours. She had to be there, nine to five, and that suited me just fine. Once or twice a week I’d ditch my buddies, head home and slip into a nice blouse, a tight skirt and a pair of heels. Sometimes I opted for a full slip and a real dress; nothing fancy, just something a woman might wear around the house.

Whether it was me being careful or dumb luck, I never did get caught.

For lack of anything else to do, I’d pretend to be the lady of the house—which in practice added up to a lot of sweeping, doing dishes, washing clothes and ironing. It was a lot of work, but it was fun, and it sure as hell impressed Mom. Of course, she never knew why I did it. She just figured I was the best kid in the world.

Needless to say, I also began experimenting with makeup. I mean, who wouldn’t? I had a fully-stocked vanity, no facial hair and two free hours every day. All I had to do was make sure I cleaned up afterward, both me and Mom’s dresser. Which is where all that housework came in handy. Not only did I know how to clean up (something teenage guys aren’t all that familiar with), but if she noticed anything was out of place I’d just say I was dusting around there.

Of course, that excuse wouldn’t work very well for making a mess inside drawers and closets, so for any and all items of clothing I took out, I became adept at remembering exactly where I found it and how it was folded or hanging. Maybe it came naturally. My own bedroom was neat as a pin and Mom’s friends often said that it looked like a girl’s room. I was okay with that.

Cosmetology is a sweet science. I read books about it in the library, huddled in a corner and surrounded by other books—on war and science, and war stories and science fiction—to disguise my real interest. For the same reason, I wrapped fashion magazines inside issues of Popular Mechanics, and studied the tips and tricks of making oneself look beautiful. And of course I practiced.

All that came at a price. My buddies at school stopped being my buddies; not because I was wearing woman’s clothes but because I wasn’t around that much. I wasn’t dating either. In fact, I didn’t have much of a social life at all. And frankly, I didn’t deserve one. What kind of guy wears his mother’s clothes?

Two days a week became three, then four. I became adept at lining my eyes and lips, applying mascara without overdoing it, and transforming a boy’s mouth into one that was believably female. I took pride at being able to spread foundation evenly, apply blush such that it could barely be seen, and blend one into the other until my face looked like the real thing. I didn’t want to be a caricature. I didn’t want to be a drag queen. I wanted to be a woman.

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Her wide eyes blinked a little too swiftly, as if only a moment ago she’d been asleep. A playful smile danced at the corners of her perfect lips.

*Jenna,* I said—but not out loud, only in my mind.

The smile in the mirror brightened. “Little brother,” she said, her voice a feminine lilt. She checked her lipstick in the small makeup mirror on its ornate pedestal.

I used to listen to Mom’s records while cleaning the house; singing along with Linda Ronstadt, moulding my voice to hers. I owed my female voice to “Blue Bayou”: “I’m going back someday… Come what may… To Blue Bayou.”

*It’s been too long,* I thought sadly.

“Never again,” she said. “Perhaps I shall keep you there forever, trapped behind my pretty eyes.” Her smile was sweet, but behind it lay a hint of malice.

I rummaged through the lingerie drawer, no longer concerned with how the slips were folded or which bra was on top. It didn’t matter anymore. They were mine.

A silk slip, the full color of midnight, slithered over my head and would have fallen to the floor had it not caught the tips of my new breasts. I ran the spaghetti straps over my shoulders and shook out the hem. I’d worn it many times before, but never like this. Never like it was my own.

A pair of nylon stockings, thigh-highs, fresh out of the package. I dipped each foot into a ball of sheer off-black nylon and unrolled it up my leg. Wide bands of elastic gripped my skin like the fingers of an impatient groom. The slip fluttered back into place as I stood up.

I returned to the closet. On the top shelf, right in the middle: an old hatbox. As expected, it contained a styrofoam head. But the wig it wore was unfamiliar. Chestnut-brown waves splashed to the bottom of the box and, when I lifted the head, dangled enticingly below the base. This was nothing I’d ever seen before.

This was something new.

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At first, I didn’t dare touch the wigs that lived in Mom’s closet. I knew they were there; I’d seen her wear them. But there was no way I could put them back exactly as they had been. How do you memorize the styling of a whole head of hair?

That lasted until I’d gotten pretty good at everything else. When you’ve mastered the lingerie; when you’ve worn nearly every dress and skirt, jacket and blouse, that fits you; when your face resembles your newlywed mother in the family photo album—there’s only one thing left to do.

I think I was fifteen at the time. The wig was short, dark brown waves tipped with tight curls, and resembled what starlets wore back in the fifties or (for somewhat older women) the sixties. That was Mom’s time, growing up and going to college, getting married and settling down. Hardly surprising she’d pick a style like that, although I would’ve preferred something longer and more youthful. But beggars can’t be… well, they don’t get to choose their own wigs.

I was wearing Mom’s favorite party dress, an off-the-shoulder number in sapphire blue. My face was fixed and I was flitting about the house in three-inch heels when it hit me: I was only a wig short of being totally transformed into a woman.

I had to sit down, I was shaking so much. I had a small glass of wine, then put the ironing board away. No more chores for this girl.

I ditched the head-scarf I was wearing and took down the wig. It was folded inside a small box, protected by a thin net. I shook it out, gently, and then—before I had a chance to change my mind—pulled it over my head.

The change was instantaneous.

My jaw dropped, my breath quickened. Darkness gathered at the edge of my vision. I was a woman.

I sat down hard, at Mom’s vanity. Of their own accord, my hands picked up her favorite perfume, shook it, and touched the stopper to my neck. I couldn’t believe it. I looked just like her.
All that came before was nothing compared to this. No matter what clothes I was wearing, no matter how feminine my face, I was just a guy in a dress. The hair made all the difference. It turned me into a real woman.

I floated about the house for the rest of the afternoon, lost in a dream world where I was a girl and no one minded. I have no idea what I did; certainly not any housework. Maybe I brazenly gazed out the living room window, heedless of who might see me. Maybe I stepped out the front door to pick up the evening paper. Maybe I walked around the block (or not). I know I did all these things and more in the days and weeks to come, although setting foot outside was something I only did in the evening, in winter (so it was dark) and with few people about.

A couple of years later a new wig showed up. It looked youthful; a bit longer, a bit more volume, and generally a lot more to my liking. Oddly enough, Mom never wore it; at least, not when I was around. On the rare occasions she bothered to wear one, she stuck with her old wig and left the younger hairstyle for me.

Did I wonder about *that*? You bet I did.
Maybe I didn’t care anymore. I hadn’t been caught and part of me assumed that I never would be. The rest was too caught up in being a woman to give a damn.

The expensive breast forms arrived a few months later. By that time I was certain: Mom was feeding my habit. Of course, neither of us said a word about it. And when she left to visit her sister, shortly after I turned eighteen, all she said was “Have fun.” We both knew what that meant: have fun being a woman.

So I did.

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The styrofoam head sat on the vanity, atop Mom’s jewelry box, with the long tresses of the new wig spilling over the edges. My eyes flicked between hair and glass, between Jenna’s lovely face and the wig’s reflection in the mirror.

I licked my lips. “It seems mother left us a present,” she said.

I felt dizzy. My hands reached for the wig, removed it from the head. I dangled it in front of my face, and let the thick waves with loose curls at the ends touch the bare skin of my chest. Soon it would envelop my head—and then those same loose curls would tickle the back of my neck, spill across my shoulders and dance on the slopes of my breasts. It would be glorious.

Then I noticed the head. Without the wig, its face had emerged from the shadows; stark-white, as if a ghost sat inside the vanity with only its head in view. A chill ran the length of my body briefer. It was my mother’s face.

I dropped the wig and went to the closet. I found Mom’s old wig and put it on the head. It was her alright.

I collapsed onto the stool. She must have had the thing specially made as some kind of death mask.

And then there were three of us.

“Time to go, bro,” Jenna muttered, as I slicked back my hair and applied a Band-Aid high to the middle of my forehead, straddling the hairline.

I picked up the wig. It felt like it was alive; forever in motion, full of sick, nervous energy. Or maybe that was me. I turned it over and cleared the opening. Finally, I bowed to the inevitable, shoved the little comb on the front-piece under the Band-Aid and pulled the wig’s headband over the back of my head.
When I straightened up, the transformation was complete.

You look lovely, dear. That was my mother. I think her voice was all in my head. But it was hard to be sure, what with my sister nattering to herself.

“Thanks, Mom.” Jenna admired herself while I did all the work, fluffing out my hair and untangling the ends. “Am I the daughter you always wanted?”

Of course you are. I love your brother dearly, but girls are special.

“Yes we are,” I murmured, combing my fingers through one tress at a time, gently, to find the knots—and finding one, grasped the hair just above the knot (to avoid damaging the root) before working it out. This went on for some time.

Do be careful, dear. That’s a very expensive hairpiece.

“I know! What do you think I’m doing? This is my hair.”

Mind your tongue. You’re a lady now. Act like one.

I made a face at the mirror and leaned forward. Twin curtains of long hair streamed into view, blinding me to all else. I groped for Mom’s wide-tooth brush and got busy with it, careful to avoid yanking on the delicate wefts that crisscrossed my scalp. Lost hair was unlikely to grow back.

“Keep brushing,” Jenna said, “nice and easy.” I tried to reply but nothing came out.

Thick waves danced to the touch of my brush; tips curled back on themselves at the end of each stroke; the heavy hair felt almost wet against my cheeks. The air was full of that new-wig scent.

“This is what it feels like to be a woman,” she said softly.

This is who you are.
I felt the weight of full breasts pulling on my chest, the gentle rasp of silk across my thighs. I felt the influx of my waist in the extra-firm grip of the body briefer. My eyes fluttered under mascara-laden lashes; my tongue darted between lips slick with cranberry lip-gloss. I could barely breathe.

This was being a woman. This was being Jenna.

I sat up. Like a river splitting in two, my hair flowed smoothly back across my shoulders, pooling at the base of my neck and filling the bare skin above my slip. It swung easily from side to side, and with each pass I could feel every curl, every last soft tip setting my nerves afire. It was almost painful, but ecstasy is like that.

I switched to a different brush, with a wider head and tufted bristles. It was a finishing brush, for smoothing hair and creating a sleek, tapered style.

“Almost done,” Jenna murmured.

She tilted her head to one side, then the other, while I kept brushing. The hair flowed smoothly through the brush now, rising and falling with its passage, each tress then falling back to its new home on my back, on my shoulders, on my chest. I sighed. There was no going back now.

“How can I ever go back to being a man, after this?

This is so cool. I’m a woman now.

A beautiful woman.

Thanks, Mom!

You're welcome, dear.

I can’t believe it, I’m actually pretty.”

Was that Jenna who’d spoken? Or me?

I shook my head. My long, thick hair shivered in response; all of it at once.

I pushed a few strays off my face and put down the brush.

You do realize... there's more to being a woman than makeup and hairstyles.

I glanced at Mom’s face, still perched on the vanity. It was all in my head…

Better get dressed. A woman can’t sit around in her delicates ALL the time.

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The black dress lay on the bed, almost forgotten in the excitement of my new hairstyle. I picked it up. Mom’s favorite LBD, still carrying her signature scent of Chanel No. 5. It probably hadn’t been washed since she’d last worn it.
I undid the sash and lowered the zipper; opened the back and stepped in. I worked the waistband up over my hips, tucked in my slip, and settled the skirt above my knees. My arms slipped easily into three-quarter sleeves. I reached back and slid the zipper up to complete the neckline, flush with the clavicle bone I once broke by flying down a hill with too much ice and not enough sled.

The dress fit perfectly. For the first time, I wondered why that was.

Were Mom and I really the same size—exactly the same size?

It had to be a coincidence. After all, I’d grown over the years (and filled out a bit), yet here I was a perfect fit for a cocktail dress my mother had worn comfortably for at least a decade.

What were the odds?

To complete the outfit: a pair of shiny black pumps, with open toes and three-inch heels.

I drifted across the bedroom, my feet now tapping delicately on the linoleum as I walked.

I checked my look in the mirror, then added a silver necklace and the earrings to match. They were, of necessity, clip-ons.

It was thrilling to see a beautiful woman smiling back at me.

Family and friends of the family had often remarked on how much I looked like Mom. The ladies said I was too pretty to be a boy. A few even dared suggest that I should have been a girl.

They were right.
Part 2: The Old Man

What followed, I can only describe as a form of madness.

I was completely dressed as a woman. My face was flawlessly made up, and rather pretty to boot. My hair was gorgeous, and looked like the real thing. My voice was warm and womanly. My mannerisms, after years of practice, were comfortably feminine (not effeminate, there’s a difference).

Jenna was more than passable. We faced one another in the hall mirror.

“I’m going outside,” she said, tossing her hair as if daring me to disagree.

I was terrified. It was barely past five o’clock, and still light out. The sun wouldn’t set for another four hours. People were outdoors; kids playing up the block, neighbors on their patios, cars coming and going. I’d be seen.

“I don’t care,” Jenna said. “Look at me! Who’s gonna know?”

*I’ll know.* Everyone else might see a young woman in a black dress, but I knew better. Why would a real woman wander around town in a cocktail dress? And what if I ran into someone I knew?

Jenna smiled knowingly. She had an answer for everything.

If anyone challenged me about being here, with a key to the house, I’d pretend to be my cousin from out of town, here to console poor Mrs. Hardwick’s grieving son—who’s not here right now, by the way. That would explain the family resemblance. If by some miracle I ran into a member of my family—not likely, as none of them lived anywhere nearby—then I’d be the girlfriend.

I stepped lightly down the stairs to the landing. My breath caught in my throat; the sharp *ping* of high heels on the tiles rang in my ears. I was out of control.

Mom’s beige trench coat was long enough to cover the skirt of my dress. I picked up my keys and opened the front door. The blood roared in my ears as I stepped outside. I couldn’t think straight.

I closed the door, locked it, dropped the keys in my pocket. It was done.

“I’m going to a dinner party,” Jenna muttered to herself, for my benefit. “I know where I’m going.”

That was important. A woman in fancy dress doesn’t just wander aimlessly; she has a destination and she knows the route. Anything else would look strange.

I didn’t want to look strange. I wanted to look—I wanted to *be*—natural.

Out the gate, which closed behind me. Now, which way to go?
Three teenagers were playing road hockey a few doors away. I knew them, back when they were little kids, and they knew me. They stopped playing and stared. I almost went back inside, but out of the corner of my eye I saw one of them nudge the other and trace an hourglass shape in the air. Phew.

I glanced at Mom’s dainty dress watch and headed in the opposite direction.

Down the block, across the street, over to the next block and down that. I passed a middle-aged couple out for a stroll and a younger guy walking his dog. I avoided eye contact, but I felt his gaze from across the road.

I needed a destination. What was around here other than houses and more houses? Of course: the church. It was only a few blocks away. Anyone who saw me headed that way would assume I was off to some do at the church. Take a different route back and they’d figure I was coming from the church. Perfect.

Of course, to get there I’d have to go right past my old buddy Toad’s house, and as of yesterday that loser was still living at home…

I felt Jenna’s coy smile. So what if he sees me? I’m a girl now.

Oh, what the hell. How likely is it that he’d glance out his window just as I was passing by? I wasn’t exactly gonna stop and wave.

A fresh breeze ruffled through my hair. I’d never felt more feminine, more alive. Across the street, down a short block. I found myself beside a pair of overgrown backyards, and across the street an undeveloped patch of woodland.

A limousine pulled up beside me. My steps faltered, but I kept walking. It stopped just ahead and a large man got out. I went to step past but he grabbed my arm and muttered, “Get in.” There was no arguing with the strength of his grip—or the knife in his other hand. Not to mention the handgun under his jacket.

Inside, with the door closed, I couldn’t see a thing. Slowly, the shadowy outlines of three men melded into view, including my captor seated next to the door. I shrank back in my seat. “I have no money, no purse—”

Quiet laughter. The smallest of the three was a stooped figure that exuded frailness. Its wispy voice warbled to life: “Miss Hardwick, I presume.”

I managed a hard swallow. How did he know my name?

The voice rasped, “Rico… Is it there?”

My captor leaned over and squeezed my left breast. With his other hand clamped to my shoulder, I couldn’t pull away. “Nope, fake,” he said cheerfully.

The small man shifted in his seat. “You’re certain?”
“I know fake,” Rico said. The two younger men snorted with laughter.

“Very well.” A thin hand waved idly. “Get us moving.”

My captor rapped on the dark glass behind me and the limo eased forward. It turned a corner and sped up. The man seated opposite me kept staring at my legs. It was pretty obvious where his interests lay. I tucked my knees together.

Next to him, a scrunched-up little face, buried under an oversized fedora, peered at me with surprisingly bright eyes. A raven’s eyes, alive with desire. “I shall come straight to the point,” the old man said. “I want the Skin.”

I just shook my head. I had no idea what he was talking about.

“Come now,” the man wheezed. “Your late mother was cremated five days ago. The funeral was yesterday. I know how these things work.”

“I’m sorry”—It was all I could manage.


The street in front of the house was deserted. The hockey players had disappeared, my neighbors had gone inside. Rico hustled me up the path to the front door, with the other two following. I gave up the keys without a fight.

Inside, I hung up my coat, thinking that if I acted normally, as if these men were guests in my home, then they might act the same way. Fat chance.

Rico hauled me into the living room, grabbed a chair from the dinner table and told me to sit down. “Biz,” he said, “you got the rope?”

“You want rope,” the other man replied, “you got rope.” Twin coils dropped to the carpet next to my feet.

Rico knelt in front of me. For one brief, dizzying moment I actually thought he might propose. But no. He picked up the rope and pushed my knees together.

“Please don’t,” I begged, trying to think of a reason. “It’ll ruin my nylons.”
He grinned. “So take ‘em off.” What else could I do? I unrolled my stockings. Rather than go barefoot, I put my shoes back on. Rico wrapped nylon cord around my legs above the knee, then around my ankles. Plastic handcuffs secured my arms to the back of the chair. I could imagine standing up and hopping away, dragging the chair with me, but I knew I wouldn’t get far.

The old man sat by the window, staring out. “Find it,” he said wearily, dismissing his men with a wave. “Just find it.”

Rico grinned at me. “Wanna tell us where it is?”

“Last chance,” Biz said quietly, his voice dangerous.

Rico crouched next to me. “You’d save us the trouble of tearin’ the place apart. Not that we mind doing it. It’s just a nice place, is all.”

My head dipped; my hair slipped forward. “I really don’t know.”

“Your funeral.”

They looked everywhere. They searched every cupboard, emptied every closet, rifled through every drawer, dumped the contents of every box. As I found out later, my stuff from school wound up scattered all over the basement. They even sliced open mattresses, pulled up floorboards and checked for hidden panels in the walls. They were very thorough. They ruined everything, but found nothing.

The old man was not pleased. He shuffled to a seat beside me, while Biz and Rico wandered through the house, searching again where they’d already searched.

“Come now, Miss Hardwick.” He coughed into his hand. “You’re young. You have the appearance of a lovely young lady. Why would you want the Skin?”

“Really—I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He coughed again. “Surely you must have known that your mother was a man.” My eyes widened. “Or rather,” he continued, “she used to be.”

That was too much. “Excuse me,” I said crossly. “My mother was not a man!”

The old man laughed. “He certainly was. Your mother was once an acquaintance of mine, one Simon Kendricks. A well-regarded archaeologist. At Cambridge, no less.” He wheezed and sat back. “We were boyhood friends. Our lives diverged, but we kept in touch.”

He seemed to read the puzzlement in my eyes. “Truly, you didn’t know?”

I could only think of one thing. “If what you say is true… My mother isn’t really my mother.” I swallowed hard. “Then who is?”

A grim smile crossed his lips. “Is that all you care about?”
He got up to stand next to the fireplace, one hand on the mantle while he flexed each leg in turn. “I’m an old man, Miss Hardwick. I don’t know how much time I have left.” He sighed. “Simon—your mother—took something very valuable when he left. An artifact from one of his digs; a grave from the Victorian era. He’d been searching for this item for a long time.”

This didn’t make sense. “You’re saying, he found skin in an old grave?”

“No, not just ‘skin’. The Skin. The fountain of youth, one might say. The font of feminine sexuality.”

“I don’t understand.”

“No, of course you don’t.” He leaned in close. “It isn’t your youth I envy, you silly girl. It’s the way you look.” He cackled. The smell of garlic and age was intense. “I want to be a woman too,” he hissed. “Just like you.”

So that was it. His dark secret. What he didn’t want the others to know.

He stepped back and gestured. “And I will be,” he said in a sure voice. “Just you wait and see.”

Rico came into the room. “There’s nothin’ here, boss. We looked—”

“I know. We’re wasting our time.” The old man hobbled toward the door. “We must get to the crematorium.”

“What about him?” He jerked a thumb at me.

“She doesn’t matter. Leave her.”

They gagged me with duct tape and left. I heard the front door close. I heard the limo drive away. I flexed my legs, but the rope was too strong.

We had something in common, the old man and I. Both of us were ladies, under the skin. But I was pretty sure that a real woman wouldn’t have left me like this. So maybe he wasn’t really a woman. Maybe he was just another wannabe.

Unlike me. ■
Part 3: Ashes to Ashes

I never felt so helpless. There was only one reason to leave me tied up: they were coming back. Assuming the old man didn’t find what he was looking for, Plan B probably involved beating the information out of me—information I didn’t have.

How could my mother not be my mother? We looked so much alike; everyone said so. When I dressed up, I assumed that I looked as she once had, back when she was my age. Except that when she was my age—she was a man.

I stretched against the rope, feeling soft hair shift across the back of my neck. And the tightness of my underwear—her underwear. I grimaced. Maybe it was just the old man messing with my head. That made more sense than the alternative.

I tried to hop the chair toward the front window, but the living room was two steps up from the dining area and I couldn’t make the jump.

Of course, they might not come back. That was almost worse, because it meant I’d be stuck here for—how long? I lived alone. I wasn’t expecting any visitors. The funeral was over, family and friends were gone. I barely knew the neighbors.

The light began to fade. I could hear voices outside, children playing in back yards. But the house felt empty. It was no longer a home, not with all that damage. Not without her. Or maybe it was me that was empty.

Finally, a knock came at the door. I tried to yell but nothing got past the gag. Then the door opened. “Hello? Anybody home?”

Shit. It was Todd Mullins, aka ‘Toad’, my good-for-nothing buddy from high school. It would have to be him. Who else would barge right in?

He sauntered into the living room like he owned the place. When he saw me, he stopped dead. His eyes got big. We stared at each other.

He moved closer. “Dude? Is that you?”

Double shit. So much for playing the damsel in distress. I nodded.

He peeled the duct tape from my mouth—gently, I noticed. I muttered my thanks, still habitually in girl-voice. That seemed to surprise him even more than the way I was dressed. He set to work on the rope.

“Uh, about the outfit… You see, these guys broke in and—”

“Yeah, sure. Some bad guys busted in and made you put on your Mom’s clothes. Happens all the time.” He pulled the rope off my ankles. “Good thing you’ve done this before, huh? So you knew how.”
Now it was my eyes that got big. “You—you knew?”


I stretched my legs and sighed. “I guess everybody knows.”

“Nope. Just me.” He grinned. “I know how to keep a secret.”

I could’ve hugged him, but I was still in cuffed to the chair. I told him to get the tin snips from the basement. While he cut me free I told him what happened.

“ Weird. They really messed the place up.”

“Yeah. They did.” I wandered through the house. Not a closet or drawer had been spared. Nothing that could conceal anything bigger than a small purse had been left unopened. The beds were ruined. There were holes in the floors, the walls and even the ceiling, where it appeared that someone had put their foot through the plaster while searching the attic. Yet they’d found nothing.

Because there was nothing to find! I wanted to scream, but instead I sat down in the den and cried. Just like a girl.


I shook my head. “Jenna,” I said slowly. “Call me Jenna.”

“Nice name. It suits you.” He wandered over to the desk.

“Thanks.” I studied his uncombed hair and unshaven face. “I gotta say, I never figured it’d be you I’d wind up… You know, sharing this with.”

“Tell me about it. So you never talked to your Mom about it?”

“God, no. That’s the last thing I wanted. She knew about it though. She knew what I was doing.” I fell silent, remembering.

The desk was strewn with papers. Toad shuffled through them—as usual, not minding his own business. “This your Mom’s stuff?”

“It ain’t mine.” I got up and came over. With me in heels, we were about the same height. That’s when I noticed the top drawer. They’d broken the lock.

“That’s always been locked,” I said. “I don’t even know if there is a key.”

“Don’t need a key now,” Toad said. He opened the drawer.

It held an untidy stack of yellowing paper—handwritten notes, typewritten papers, photocopies of journal articles—and a single bound notebook. It felt brittle when I picked it up, and the spine cracked when opened. It was in Mom’s handwriting. No surprise there. But the name inside the cover was Simon Kendricks.
I sat down hard, bouncing the desk chair. “Oh, God. It’s true…”

Toad touched my shoulder. “Jenna?”

I hadn’t told him that part, what the old man had said about my mother. It was just too weird. And probably a lie. Or maybe not—which was worse.

“Gimme a minute.” I skimmed through the notebook, reading a paragraph here, a page there. By the time I closed it, my head was spinning. How could any of this be true? On the other hand—how could it not be? These were her own words.

Then I remembered. “Shit. What’s the time?”

“I dunno. Think I wear a watch?”

I recovered the desk clock from the floor. Only a few minutes past eight. There was still time. “Is your car here?” I’d never driven in heels, and for all his faults Toad was a great driver. Not to mention fast.

“Yeah, sure. Ya know, it’s weird to hear you talk like that,” he said. “I mean, you sound like a chick and all. But you talk more like a guy.”

“Old habits.” I looked around the room, then shoved the notebook inside a ring binder marked TAX RETURNS. “Let’s go.”

* *

Toad’s car was a beater. I struggled with the seat belt while simultaneously trying to button up Mom’s faux fur coat, which was what I happened to grab from the hall closet on the way out. The evening was cooling off.

I heard him laugh. “Babe, you are way too classy for this ride.”

“For Christ’s sake, just drive!”

He drove. “Mind telling me where I’m going?”

“The funeral home. You know the one. We were there yesterday.”

“Got it.” He jammed the accelerator down. “Why?”

“To pick up a package.” I glanced at Mom’s dress watch, realizing it had been right there on my wrist all along. “It’s open ‘til nine.”

“We’ll make it,” he assured me. “What package?”

“They told me about it before the service. Then I forgot about it.” I paused to catch my breath. “It’s from the crematorium. Something that belonged to Mom.”

He glanced at me. “Wasn’t that where those guys went?”

I nodded. “It’s what they were after. The artifact.” What else could it be? “They think Mom was wearing it when she died.”
“Uh-huh. But it would’ve burned up… uh, when…”

“No—that’s just it.” I squirmed in my seat, straightening my skirt. “The notebook said the thing is indestructible. Mom found it in an old grave, back when…”

“Why would your Mom wear something she found in an old grave?”

“That’s kinda hard to explain.”

“I bet.” He paused. “Maybe it got buried. You know, with your Mom.”

“No,” I said, my voice barely a whisper. “That was just ashes.”

* 

The receptionist was a middle-aged woman with stern expression tattooed onto her face. “I see,” she said, her voice dripping disdain. “So you’re the late Mrs. Hardwick’s son, are you?”

In my rush to get there on time I’d forgotten how I must look. “Yes—yes I am,” I coughed, struggling to find my old voice.

“It’s true,” Toad said helpfully. “She’s, like, totally a guy.” I told him to shut up.

“I’m not a fool, young lady. Tell Mr. Hardwick he can pick up his own package.” She checked the time, then pointed at the door. “Tomorrow.”

In all my years of dressing, I never thought my disguise might be too good. But I was far too stressed out to feel validated. I peeled off the wig. I’d forgotten about the Band-Aid, which took some of my real hair with it. It didn’t matter.

I had to get the Skin. At the time I couldn’t have said exactly why I wanted it so badly, but just the fact that the old man was willing to go to so much trouble seemed reason enough.

The woman looked like she’d been shot. She sat stiffly in her chair, her lips squirming. “Young people these days,” she muttered. “Can’t tell the boys from the girls.” She reached under her desk and handed me a plastic bag.

“I suppose you’re one of those awful tomboys,” she said, not to me but to Toad.

“What, me? No! I’m a guy—” He bolted out the door.

* 

Instead of returning to the car I found myself heading the other way, toward the memorial gardens. To where the dearly departed ashes were interned. To Mom.

The plaque was up, set nearly at eye level in a wall of such plaques. I stared at it, plastic bag in one hand, my wig in the other, with my mother’s fur coat hanging open and her favorite little black dress showing through underneath. Was I still the dutiful son? Or was I the darling daughter? I didn’t know anymore.
Part of me wanted to chuck the whole thing; sell the house and leave town. But it wasn’t a very big part and it was getting smaller with each passing hour. In my heart, I knew: I wanted to be a woman. I wanted to be her.

I opened the bag. A silvery mass of something slithered out. Cloth? Metal?

It felt almost alive in my hands. I found the edge and held it up. It resembled a body briefer in shape, but the surface seemed to shimmer—as if some of the fire still remained that had freed it from my mother’s body.

I asked, “Was this what you were?” But her ashes maintained their silence, even as she herself had during her life. I had never known Simon Kendricks, the man behind my mother. Was he married? Did he leave behind a wife, a family? Did he regret his choice?

One thing I did know, from the notebook: Kendricks was my mother. The Skin had transformed male into female, right down to the genetic level. It had created the womb from which I was born. In a way, I was a child of the Skin.

I found a bench and sat down. I ducked my head back into the wig; for warmth if nothing else. I examined the artifact, spilling it from one hand to the other like it was made of sand. Or water. What the hell was it? Some kind of enchanted fabric? A product of alien technology older than mankind itself? Where did it come from, how old was it?

The notebook had asked all these questions, but answered none of them. No one knew how many people it had transformed, how many men had lived female lives because of it. It held no memory of my mother’s predecessors.

In that sense it was nothing more than a machine. A machine that could turn a man into a woman. Wasn’t that exactly what I’d been looking for my whole life?

I was shivering. Twilight had descended upon the city and I had no wish to spend the night in a graveyard. I rose, barely noticing the swirl of skirt on my bare legs, the sharp clatter of heels on the stonework. The Skin slid into a pocket on my fur coat. There’d be plenty of time for that later.

I touched the plaque, then slipped away into the gathering dark. ■
Part 4: She Who Kills

I couldn’t go home. The old man and his gang would certainly look there; I had what they wanted. I briefly considered—and dismissed—the idea of pretending to be Toad’s girlfriend. His parents knew me. Besides, who’d believe the guy could score a fox like me? Plus, the idea of cozying up to Toad turned my stomach.

Toad suggested his uncle’s place. I didn’t know he even had an uncle.

“Uh… He’s a friend of my Dad’s. They go way back. I’m looking after the place while he’s out of town. Watering the plants, stuff like that.”

“Plants, eh? Sure you can handle it?”

“Oh, ha, ha,” he said. “Are we goin’ there or not?” I nodded.

We drove in silence while the night closed in, isolating the car from the rest of the world. I put my hand in my pocket. Nestled at the bottom, the Skin felt like a pool of liquid polymer. I pulled out and rubbed my fingers together, imagining them wet with something that wasn’t water. “I’ve been thinking—”

“Don’t hurt yourself.”

“Uh-huh.” I shook my hair back. “Back at the house you said that you ‘knew what to look for’. How you could tell that—”

“What about it?” He glanced at me—was that uneasiness?

I tucked my skirt around my knees. “How is it you know how to spot a tranny?”

“Common knowledge, dude.” He giggled, which didn’t sound like him at all.

“My ass.” I hesitated. “You don’t, um…”

He looked shocked. “No way! I just look at that stuff online.”

I’d never met an admirer before. “So what are you into? The clothes? The hair? Cross-dressers, shemales, transsexuals—what?”

He turned a shade of red that I’d never seen before. “The—the first one,” he stammered. “But, like, I’m not gay or anything.”

“God, no. Me neither… Not that there’s anything wrong with that.”

“No, no—of course not!” We both laughed.

“So when I’m dressed like this…” I brushed at my skirt. “Do you—”

“God, no!” The car swerved briefly. “No offense, dude. It’s just—”

I raised my hand. “Let’s just leave it there, okay?”
The curtains were closed but the house was lit up like a Christmas tree. Maybe Toad had been there earlier this evening. “You’re supposed to leave one or two lights on at night,” I said, as he escorted me up the path, “not all of them.”

“Guess I forgot,” Toad muttered. He opened the door. It was unlocked.

I shook my head and stepped inside. I sure wouldn’t want him looking after—

The door slammed shut and someone grabbed my arm. “Well, well. Look who’s here,” Rico said, grinning.

I looked at my buddy. “Don’t tell me this guy is your uncle.” Toad just grimaced.

Rico paraded me into the living room. The old man seemed pleased. “Lovely to see you again, Miss Hardwick. Welcome to my temporary home.” He patted the arm of his chair. “The economy being what it is, I choose to rent.”

Rico looked down at Toad. “Okay, where is it?”

Toad couldn’t point at me fast enough. “It’s in her coat.”

So much for friendship. Rico took my fur and pulled the Skin from its pocket, then promptly dropped both. “Damn thing feels like it’s alive.”

The old man’s eyes seemed to glow. “There you are,” he hissed, so quietly I could barely hear him. He might as well have said The precious…

Toad cleared his throat. It seemed to break the spell. “Pay him his blood money,” the old man said, dismissing Toad with a wave of his hand.

Biz towered over the younger man. “As agreed,” he said grimly, “one brand-new iPhone 4.” Toad accepted the smooth black object. “Pre-loaded,” Biz muttered in obvious disgust, “with the two hundred and forty-one apps you requested.”

I couldn’t believe it. “You sold me out for an iPhone?”

“Of course not!” Toad looked hurt. “Where’s the rest?”

Biz handed him a card. “And one pre-paid credit card.”

“A thousand smackers,” he said gleefully. The card disappeared into his pocket. Then he glanced at me, shrugged—as if to say Well? What did you expect?—and left. At least he didn’t kiss me on the cheek.

Biz closed and locked the front door. I was on my own.

Rico used the knife from his belt to pick up the Skin and drop it into his boss’s lap. The old man cooed over the thing like a long lost pet. “I’ve been looking for you,” he sighed, lifting the Skin to his face, “for such a long time.”
He let it slide from one hand to the other, catching the light like liquid gold. His hands began to tremble. In fact, his entire body was shaking.

“I have to put it on,” he cried weakly. “I have to do it now.”

Rico and Biz exchanged glances. “Uh, boss? Wasn’t we gonna sell this thing?”

Biz said, “We were gonna find a rich guy who wants to be a rich chick.”

“It’s worth millions, boss.”

“Shut up!” The old man rocked to his feet. “I’m doing this.”

Rico and Biz stared at him.

The old man glared back. “Well? I can’t do it myself,” he said harshly. “One of you has to take me to the bedroom. And help me undress.”

Rico’s eyes glazed over. Biz turned around and peered through a gap in the curtains, hands behind his back.

I drew a shaky breath. “I’ll do it.”

The old man looked shocked. “You’d do that? For me?”

I managed a grim smile and muttered something about ‘we girls gotta stick together’. Rico and Biz weren’t about to argue. The old man held out his arm. His other hand clutched the Skin to his chest like a life preserver.

* * 

We were alone. “I don’t get it,” I said. “Why do you want to be a woman?”

“Besides the age difference, you mean?” He laughed, then coughed—hard.

“Is that it? To get your health back, even if you have to be a woman?”

“A few more decades of life… is not to be sneezed at.”
“But people look up to you.” I helped him over to the bed and removed his jacket. “You have power, authority. If I had that…” I took off his shoes.

He drew a long, rasping breath and unbuttoned his shirt. “Power and authority… do not preclude the need to be female.” He stood up and dropped his pants.

“I figured I was just weak.” I folded his pants and added them to the pile.

He snorted. “No, Miss Hardwick. Your shortcomings as a man…” He sighed. “Rather, your shortcomings as a male are irrelevant. It has nothing to do with being a woman.” A raspy laugh. “Although it would make it easier.”

I’m not sure when I made the choice. Maybe it was while he stood there, his wrinkled body clad only in a dirty undershirt and loose boxers. Maybe it was earlier, when I made my offer of help. Or maybe it was when he first told me what he intended. Disgust welled up within me like effluent from a plugged toilet. Something so beautiful—something so wonderful—should not be forced to merge with this decaying monstrosity. It was wrong.

“I’m sorry,” I said. I grabbed the back of his head and slammed his face into the bedside table. He went down softly, without a sound—a little heap of bones and skin as dry as the Taklamakan Desert.

It didn’t matter whether or not he was dead—if they found me now I was the one who’d be dead. I had only one chance. I stepped out of my little black dress.

Rico rapped on the door. “How’s it goin’ in there?”

“Just fine,” I said hurriedly. “He’s transforming now.” Then I added, “Wow, is it ever freaky. This could take awhile.”

Footsteps disappeared back down the hall. I sighed with relief.

The die was cast. I slipped into my mother’s Skin.

* 

Immense pain. It began in my groin and spread from there. I fell onto the bed and tried to stretch out, but my body kept trying to curl into a fetal position.

From hips to shoulders, my skin was on fire. Whatever the Skin was doing, it was brutal. Bones shrunk, ribs were absorbed into the surrounding flesh, and part of the thing burrowed straight into my crotch—although I was only dimly aware of such details at the time. All that really mattered was the pain.

I thrashed from side to side as my waist contracted and my chest bulged. My body already felt different, just in the way my weight shifted as I moved. The bedspread grew slick with sweat. At least I think it was sweat. It felt far too slippery, more like some kind of cream moisturizer. And my skin hurt like hell.
My dick was flaring like a lit fuse, although I knew I was no longer male. Quite the opposite; a tunnel had been burned into my body, leading to a cavity in which I might someday birth a son of my own, and then to the egg-sacs that my gonads had become. The transformation had all the finesse of a chunk of metal being hammered flat. It felt like being kicked in the crotch so often, and so viciously, that my balls took up permanent residence inside my body.

When I opened my eyes, Rico and Biz were standing next to the bed. So much for escaping out the window. Upon reflection, I probably should’ve done that first.

Rico grinned. “Man, you made one hell of a racket. Like a two-dollar whore doing the whole fuckin’ Navy.” He glanced at Biz. “He dead?”

“Nah. I saw him twitch.” He prodded the old man’s body with his foot. “Soon will be, though.” He glanced at me. “She did us a solid.”

“No kidding. I wasn’t gonna work for no chick.”

I could feel the bile rising in my throat. I killed a man. But no—it was the Skin, extending itself up my neck. It took only seconds to reach my chin, then crept up the back of my head and through my scalp. What would I look like? A woman, certainly—but who? My mother? Did every man transformed by the Skin end up as the same woman? Or would I turn into an alternate-world female me?

I was about to find out. The Skin crawled over my face, my mouth, my eyes. For an instant I couldn’t see. And then it was over; the Skin and I were one.

Biz picked up the old man’s body. “I’ll stick this in the trunk. You bring her.”

“Sure.” Rico grinned. “But I’m gonna take my time, okay?”

Biz rolled his eyes and walked out.

Rico came closer. “Think you’re so smart? Figured you’d win just by puttin’ that thing on?” He took his jacket off. “Uh-uh. We’re takin’ it back.”

I rolled over, pulling away from a mass of wet hair stuck to the bed. It was the wig, which had fallen off. Yet thick dark hair was streaming off my head, wet with whatever-the-hell-it-was. I pawed it off my face and tried to get up.

“You can’t take it off now,” I gasped. “It’s permanent.”

That’s when it really hit me. I was a woman now, for the rest of my life. The notebook had said as much, information that Simon Kendricks had discovered the hard way. But for some reason it isn’t real until you say it out loud.

“Not a problem, babe.” His laugh had an nasty edge. “We’ll just run you through the furnace.”
Oh my God. He unzipped his pants. “But not before I have a little fun.”

I collapsed onto my back. I had no strength to resist him.

Rico took out his gun and placed it well out of reach. “Wouldn’t want you gettin’ ahold of this gun,” he said, leering. He pursued me onto the bed.

I could feel the Skin venture out onto my arms and legs. Shrinking the bones and muscles of my limbs wasn’t nearly as painful, but I could barely move.

“Man, this thing really did a number on you. You are one sexy mother—”

A solid tower of flesh hung from his fly. It was my first view of a man from the other side of the fence, so to speak. I wasn’t impressed. Sure, it was big—

But—my breath caught—wasn’t big a good thing? The Skin had feminized my body and my head; maybe it had done the same to my brain.

I stared up at the ceiling as he pushed into me, my limbs splayed and rigid. It was surprisingly easy. Apparently the Skin doesn’t create virgins. Why the hell should it? The Skin itself is female; the man just supplies the body. And it’s been female for a very long time. It must have made love a thousand times. Not that love had anything to do with what was happening to me. Although it did feel good.

He grunted as he shifted his weight back and forth. He’d done this before. Not just the sex, the rape. Who knew how many women had fallen into his hands, unable to escape because he had the greater strength, and weapons to boot?
Who knew how many more there might be in the future?
The Skin reached the tips of my fingers and toes at the same moment, apparently having timed its completion for dramatic effect. The fire in my extremities died away. My strength returned. I was weaker than I had been, but I could move.

I groaned. It really did feel nice. I wondered if part of me had wanted this.

Rico grinned down at me. He was enjoying this. No. It was wrong.

His knife was still in its holster on his belt. As he bent down, increasing the tempo of his thrusts, the slim fingers of my right hand—now tipped with hard nails the color of blood—acted of their own accord. I plucked the knife from its sheath, and in one swift motion plunged it deep into his back.

It seemed like a fair trade—he had impaled me, so I did the same to him.

He looked more surprised than hurt. Then he toppled forward, his head over my left shoulder like some monstrous infant, and lay still. I tried to push him off, but he was still stiff. I had to roll over with him, then lift myself free.

I was thankful he hadn’t quite finished. I had no wish to bear the man’s child.

Two down, one to go. I picked up Rico’s gun. But before I could find a place to hide, the curtains lit up like a discothèque. I peeked out the window. Two police cars were parked out front, their lights flashing. As I watched, Biz was marched through the yard, his hands cuffed behind his back.

No need, then, for my Buffy impersonation. I ditched the gun and found a clean sheet to wrap myself in. I was a lady now. We have standards.

* 

The police informed me that my boyfriend had witnessed the kidnap and made the call to 9-11, after following the limo to this house. Boyfriend? One Todd Mullins, who, as far as the cops were concerned, was a hero.

I didn’t bother to set them straight. I did tell them that I wasn’t going to make an official complaint (legally speaking, Jenna Hardwick didn’t exist). The cops were okay with that; they’d been after the gang for years and had plenty of other stuff to hang on Biz, including the old man’s dead body.

Naturally, I didn’t mention the Skin. Biz did, but no one believed him.

Toad drove me home. “Let me get this straight,” I said. “You sold me out to the gang, and then turned around and ratted them out to the cops?”

“Sure did,” he said cheerfully. “Made the call on my new phone.”

“Let me guess. You didn’t tell them how you got the phone, did you?”
He grinned. “Why would I do that?” Then he shrugged. “Seems to me everything turned out okay. Two of them are dead, the other one’s goin’ to jail, you’re a woman, and I’ve got an iPhone. It’s win-win.”

I shook my head. “I was assaulted, Todd.”

His smile faded. “Yeah, I heard. I’m sorry. I didn’t know they were gonna do that.”

He helped me into the house. “The way I see it,” I said, letting the sheet slip from my shoulders. “You owe me. So here’s the deal. I’m going to take a shower and relax, and you, my friend, are going to clean this place up.”

He looked around. “But—this is one hell of a serious mess. It’ll take a week just to get started. I don’t—”

I shrugged. “Or I could tell the cops where you got that phone. And the cash card. I understand that sort of thing leaves a very detailed paper trail.”

Toad actually did a pretty good job, once he put his mind to it.

* *

A few weeks later, going through my mother’s papers, I found the letter:

My darling daughter:

I’m so sorry you had to go through this on your own. Becoming a woman isn’t easy. Believe me, I know. I only wish I could have spoken to you about my own experience, but I could never find the right words.

It’s true that I didn’t intend to live my life as a woman. I found out too late that my little experiment was a life sentence. But having you, sweet child, has made it all worthwhile. You gave my time as a woman meaning.

I know how confusing it’s been for you, being drawn to womanhood from such a young age. Maybe that was my fault, although it certainly wasn’t what I intended. Most likely this is simply how the Skin works; how it ensures that someone from the next generation will want it and need it.

And please don’t feel that you’ve somehow failed as a man. Once the Skin came into your possession, you could not have made any other choice.

Love, Mom