Is he ready yet? I need one more picture for the blog.

Almost. His hair has to look like he fussed over it, to get it just right.

Okay, but the clock's ticking on that ransom.

Don't worry. When I snap my fingers he will perform.

One look in the mirror and he'll freak right out.

Get the webcam ready.

It's ready. I'm hoping for something along the lines of, "Daddy, please save me from these awful people."

Whatever. It's what comes next that'll seal the deal. I give him the trigger word and he turns into his precious mommy.

Freaky. You did a hell of a job makin' him look like the old gal in her younger days.

Wasn't hard. He already had the face, I only had to add makeup.

Wait 'til Tess here begs her husband to do what we want. It'll bring tears to your eyes.

Here we go.

SNAP!
At first I had no idea where I was. Vacations can be like that, always waking up in a strange room; although finding myself already standing was a bit different.

There were three people in the room, a man and two women, none of whom I recognized. I stared at each of them in turn. No one said a word.

One of the women—younger and more well-dressed—stared back. She looked a bit vacant, blinking as though she too was fighting off the effects of a long sleep. She was also seriously gorgeous.

My lips parted and so did hers.

My fingers flew up to touch my cheek—so did hers. *Oh, my God…*

I turned to the woman in the pink robe. “Did you do this? What the hell—? Why would you—?”

“Tell it to the camera, sweetie,” she said, pointing.

The man was pointing a laptop in my direction. “Thomas Hawethorne,” he said loudly. “Listen up. Your Daddy is here. Tell him what we did to you. Tell him if he don’t do what we want, you’ll be a woman where it counts.”

The woman gave me a push. “Make it good, luv. It’s your dick on the line.”

There was a Skype session open on the screen. A bald head in the video window resolved itself into the Senator’s face. “Fa—father?” Long blonde hair swung into view as I leaned forward. “It’s me,” I whispered. “Thomas.”

The man’s lips were moving, but nothing emerged. He looked worried, clutching at the clumps of hair on the side of his head.

“I just woke up and found myself like this,” I said, failing to stay calm. “I swear, I had nothing to do with it. I don’t know these people.”

“The Senator knows who we are,” the man said, aiming his words at the computer. “Tell him what’s at stake.”

My eyes went wide. “I don’t want to be a woman.” I grabbed the hem of the skirt I was wearing and checked between my legs. I could see only the flat crotch of a tight panty girdle, but there was a faint bulge of something being crushed… “It’s not too late,” I said. “But they said—” That’s when I remembered where I was. Bangkok, Thailand. Sex change capital of the world.

I stared into my father’s eyes. “Don’t let them do this to me.”

The man stopped me with his hand. “That’s enough.”

I felt a gentle touch on my shoulder. A soft female voice wormed its way into my ear, speaking but one word—“Tess”—but it hit me like a bag of hammers.
At first I had no idea where I was. Conventions can be like that, always waking up in a strange room. However, on this occasion I was standing up and appeared to be fully dressed. That was different.

There were two people in the room, a man and a woman, neither of whom I recognized. I stared at the woman, who was dressed like a total frump—not the kind of outfit you’d ever catch me wearing. Maybe at a spa, and if I was dead. She smiled back but did not speak.

A mirror confirmed that I was dressed appropriately for the company of strangers. Although—and I found this disturbing—I did not recognize the clothes I was wearing. I straightened my skirt, making sure it covered my slip. The fit was perfect and it did look nice; just the sort of thing I might have chosen for myself. Only I didn’t.

The frumpy woman pointed me toward a small, and strangely thin, television set on the table. On it was my husband, although he was bald and looked much older than he should. I moved closer. “Crawford, is that you?”

I couldn’t hear his reply, but he appeared rather agitated, tearing at what little hair he had left. I asked if he could hear me, and he nodded. The device must be some kind of video telephone. “What on earth is going on?” I said, speaking slowly and clearly. “I don’t where I am or who these people are.”

The man came around behind me. “Daddy knows who we are,” he said roughly, grabbing my wrists. “Just tell him to do what we want.”

“You’re—hurting me,” I gasped, struggling. To no avail; my arms were pinned. Long hair fell across my face. “Crawford, they’re hurting— Please—” The man tightened his grip. I groaned. “If you know what they want—” Another gasp and I slumped forward, my hair dangling freely.

The man yelled past me: “Do the right thing, Senator. The planet needs a carbon tax. We’re dying out here.” I whimpered as he yanked on my wrists. “Better decide what’s more important: kowtowing to Big Coal or getting your son back in one piece—unless you’d rather have your wife back instead.”

The woman leaned over the tiny television. “We’ll be watching, Senator,” she said loudly. “Vote wisely.” The screen went dark.

The man released me. “Think it’ll work?”

The woman shrugged. “It better. He’s the swing vote.”
I straightened my brassiere, tidied my hair and lifted my chin. “Who are you people? Why do you care how my husband votes on some tax?”

“We care about the planet, that’s who we are,” the man said.

“The Senator takes donations from the biggest polluters the world has ever seen,” the frump said. “Oil companies, Big Coal, you name it. We’re just giving him something else to think about.”

“Why do you keep calling him ‘Senator’? Crawford is the mayor of Cincinnati.”

The man laughed. “Lady, you’re twenty years late.”

“That’s absurd. He won his second election only last week, with a bigger majority than the first time. I should be there now, helping with his inauguration.”

“He doesn’t need your help,” the woman said, “but we do. We need you to sit tight and look pretty, so he’ll think twice about voting against the environment.”

“I’m his wife, not some air-headed pinup.”

She smirked. “You’re not his wife, sweetie. Your name isn’t even Tess, although it soon might be if the Senator doesn’t wise up.”

It was my turn to laugh. “If I’m not Tess, then who am I?”

Another smile. “Does Thomas Hawethorne ring any bells?”

“Thomas? My little boy? Are you insane? The child is four years old.”

“He was—twenty years ago. In fact, I think I’ll bring him back. This conversation is getting old.” She snapped her fingers—and the world changed.

* 

I would have fallen if the man hadn’t caught me. The laptop had been shut down.

I looked up, eyes wide. “Is Father going to help me?”

The woman glanced at her watch. “We’ll know in a few hours. In the meantime, we need a few more pictures for the website. Something to show off those airbags we installed yesterday.”

I had no idea what they meant until they removed the top I was wearing. That’s when I realized what they’d done. Oh, God… I had breasts and they felt real.

The blouse they squeezed me into left no doubt as to my condition. I was stacked like cereal at the supermarket. With my makeup re-done and hair re-styled, I was forced to kneel on a padded chair, facing the man with the camera.

What choice did I have? Father was my only hope.
Look down... Now lean forward a bit. I want the Senator to see what the future has in store for his precious son.

Is this okay?

Oh... I can’t believe I’m doing this. It’s just so humiliating...

Your hair’s in the way. Pull it more to one side.

I’m sorry. How’s this?

Perfect, babe. Just hold still.

Strange to think that the future of the world might be riding on those melons.

I like our chances. As melons go, they’re pretty damn ripe.

Just take the picture.

Alright, keep your shirt on. I’ll go update the website.

You do that. In the meantime, I’ll have a little chat with the wife. A bit more hypnosis will cut that bitch down to size.

Amanda Hawkins
The instant I saw the scandalous way I was dressed, I knew what was happening. I had obviously fallen into the clutches of some sort of pornography ring; perhaps one dealing in suggestive photos of powerful women. I was, after all, the power behind Crawford’s throne, as it were.

The video of my husband was a fake; had to be. Which would explain the lack of sound. They’d found some stooge who resembled Crawford, glossing over the age difference with a silly “twenty years ago” story—like I’d ever fall for that.

As everyone knows, I’m not a woman accustomed to being pushed around. So the moment that frumpy woman came close enough, I grabbed that little television set and smacked her right in the throat.

She went down and stayed down. Served the bitch right.

Her partner lunged at me, but stumbled over the body writhing on the floor and went down himself. We make our own luck, don’t we? I kicked him in the face, and with the shoes they’d made me wear I’m sure it hurt. Served him right too.

I’m no James Bond but I’ve seen his films, and I know when it’s time to beat a strategic retreat. I was out the door every bit as fast as that contestant in the Miss Ohio Pageant who found spiders in her finishing powder. Just one spider, actually; one very large spider. All’s fair in love and pageantry. Not that it was poisonous or anything; I wouldn’t have gone that far.

The next room was empty of people but full of luggage. I headed for the far door, pausing only to take the woman’s purse. I found myself alone in the hallway of a nondescript hotel, which was just as well because I had no wish to meet anyone else in the gang. I clattered down three flights of stairs and emerged on the street.

Asians crowded the sidewalk and they didn’t look like tourists. It certainly wasn’t Kansas, or anywhere else in the good ol’ U.S. of A. The signage was a mixture of English and some script language—although not Chinese—which meant this was probably a tourist district. Trying to blend in might actually work.

What really concerned me was that woman’s mention of my son. It suggested that he too might be a prisoner, which meant I had to go back.

Damn. Still attracting too much attention. I clutched my stolen purse and tried to pretend I knew what I was doing. What I really needed was a change of clothes.

A nearby thrift store came to my rescue. I managed to find a decent blouse and a skirt that fit, although the hem was a little too short. I kept the underwear and the
tights, but swapped those awful heels for something sensible. My mother once told me that anything over three inches is suspect, but I’d always found an extra half-inch more more to my liking. What that says about me I leave to history.

The owner accepted the credit card from my purse, even though I botched the frump’s signature. The odd thing was the expiry date: who ever heard of a credit card good for another twenty-three years? Same story with the driver’s licence, and even the money. The bills had seemingly been printed anywhere from nine to nineteen years in the future. Why go to such lengths to support that ridiculous story about Crawford being a senator?

Of course, there was more to it than that. I was supposedly not Tess, but Thomas. Little Tommy would be twenty-four in this strange future. He was a slender child, small for his age, and he did take after me—everyone said so. Just the sort of boy who might someday be able to impersonate his mother…

I put that thought aside as I approached the hotel. If my son was inside, I had to find him. When nothing better came to mind, I marched through the front door and confronted the man behind the desk. Had he seen my little boy? Blonde hair, on the small side, very shy? He had not. That, or he was a damn good liar. I told him I’d look around for myself. He shrugged.

Thank God for service employees who just don’t give a damn.

I took the elevator to the third floor and began trying doors. What was I supposed to do—smash my way through half an inch of solid wood? I hoped that a change of clothes would be enough to conceal my identity, at least long enough to have a fighting chance to grab Tommy and get the hell out of there.

Surprise, surprise—it wasn’t.

The third lock I rattled was opened by a man holding an ice bag to the side of his head. He dropped that and yanked me inside, where a woman with a raspy voice slammed me into a headlock and screamed at me the kind of names sailors reserve for people they really don’t like.

I told them I’d come back for my son. Take me, if they must, but let Tommy go. He was just a boy. For some reason, both of them found that hilarious.

Two minutes later I was bound and gagged—with more rope than seemed necessary—and my captors were updating something called a ‘blog’ with fresh photos. Something for Crawford to think about before the vote. Then the woman leaned over me and snapped her fingers. My head spun in for a crash landing.

*
I was bound and gagged, without a clue how it had happened. I had a vague memory of changing clothes and knocking on doors, but it seemed like something that happened a long time ago. A more immediate concern was what my captors were discussing. I was pretty sure I’d been taken to a clinic once already, to install my new hood ornaments. A second trip could mean only one thing, and it sure as hell wasn’t likely to involve removing the implants.

The woman wore a bandage on her neck and a nasty smile on her face. “Such a pretty boy,” she muttered, flicking at the loose tress over my left eye. “What’s it like, Tommy, turning into your own mother?”
My what? That’s when it hit me: the woman they had disguised me as looked an awful lot like the young mother in my childhood photos—a woman who had passed from this Earth nearly fifteen years previous.

Who am I kidding? I was a carbon copy of Tess Hawethorne. Specifically, the way she looked some twenty years ago, around the time of her marriage to the Senator.

Twenty years. Why did that sound so familiar?

“Look at me, boy.” She must have seen the fear in my eyes, as her smile widened. “I’m going to turn you into a woman.”

I shook my head. This could not be happening.

“There’s nothing you can do, so just relax and enjoy the ride.” She removed my gag. “Too bad she isn’t here, eh? The late Ms. Hawethorne would have loved to see her son grow up to be just like her. Tess.”

*

I took a deep breath and let it trickle out slowly. My brain felt like it was stuffed with cotton candy. “Take me to the damn clinic,” I said.

The frump stared at me, thoughtfully stroking her neck. “Why?”

“Just let Tommy go. He’s done nothing wrong.”

“All right.” She untied my legs—but only my legs—and we left the room.

I thought we might be stopped, but for some reason no one seemed to think that a captive woman being frog-marched into a limousine was all that unusual. That said a lot about the people in the area, and what passed for a society, but feeling superior wasn’t going to save my dick from the surgeon’s noose.

My dick? Opposing thoughts collided like icebergs in a warming sea, fusing one idea into another before melting into a fluid that spanned the childhood of a young girl, through womanhood and the birth of her only child, on through the life of that son and his final transformation into the kind of woman his mother had once been.

The world grew crystal clear as I gazed through the limousine window; one street after another sliding by and soon enough they all looked the same; each crowded with vendors and errand boys and laborers of every stripe. Credit card, driver’s licence, paper money from the future—it all made sense now.

This was the future, and I was not Tess Hawethorne. Not yet.

The limo pulled up in front of a squat two-storey building, with no signage aside from the only one that mattered: “Cosmetic and Sex Change Clinic”.
“Your son is inside,” the man said. “Spread ‘em for the cutter and we let him go.”

I stared at the floor. “Agreed. Untie me.”

The moment my hands were free, I turned around and jammed my thumbs into his eye sockets. He went down, once more, screaming. Baby.

“You’re a fucking monster,” the woman cried. She aimed a dainty gun at me, the kind a lady of uncommon breeding might hide in her cleavage. Probably stole it. But her hands were shaking and she wasn’t quick enough to stop me.

I pointed the gun at the man weeping on the floor. “You created me,” I said. “Both of you. I’m not Thomas anymore, but I’m not Tess either.” I opened the door and stepped out. I could have killed them both—and maybe I should have, given what they’d done—but sympathy stayed my hand. I couldn’t agree with their methods, but in their own warped way they were trying to save the world.

I slammed the door and waved the driver on.

The vehicle disappeared slowly into traffic. I took a deep breath and turned to face the clinic. The sky had faded to a soft pink, the color of the pillows I’d slept with as a little girl—or so my memory insisted. I knew it couldn’t be true, but maybe the literal truth no longer mattered. I wasn’t Thomas anymore.

Like my father, I had a choice to make. Man or woman?

Oh, who am I kidding? Tess is a nice name.

*  

This time I knew exactly where I was. Whitewashed walls, a nurse standing over me with her practiced smile of reassurance, the ache between my legs…

More to the point, I knew who I was. The son had in some way fused with the memory of his mother, and there now existed a new Tess for this new world.

As per my request before going under the knife, the nurse left me today’s copy of the Bangkok Post. I headed straight for the international news. The story out of Washington was… well, to be honest, not much of a surprise. The man was a pig, after all; a narcissist. Always thinking of himself. That would have to change.

*  

“Good Lord… Thomas? Is that you?” The Senator was tearing at his hair again. Frankly, the man could ill afford to lose any of what little he had left. I resolved to cure him of that bad habit as well…
Thomas is gone. I'm Tess. I've chosen to honor the memory of my mother by taking her name.

Those sons of bitches! Why would they do this? I did what they wanted.

You most certainly did not.

I'm not a fool, Crawford. I can read.

So here's what we're going to do.

I'm going to be your wife again. In name only, of course.

I will live in a separate suite and have full access to the Hawethorne fortune. There will be no pre-nup.

Unless you'd rather the press hear about what happened to your son... and what you chose to do about it.

Also, you and your staff will find a way to overturn that vote and pass a carbon tax.

I'm an ambitious woman, Crawford.

I want to save the world from men like you.

THE END