

Homeostasis Criminal

by Michael P Calligaro

Todd Lucas stared into his drink, all the while thinking, regretting, and wishing. Feeling the telltale shortness of breath, he hastily set the glass down on the bar and rushed into the restroom. The coughing fit hit him as soon as he closed the door. Gripping the edge of the sink with as much strength as his weakened fingers could muster, he held still and waited for it to pass.

The coughs left him gasping to drag air through a rough throat. Staring up into the dingy mirror at a face he was only now growing accustomed to, he consoled himself that at least this time there was no blood. He wet his hands and rubbed them on his face, then returned to the tavern.

All the patrons stared at him. Todd self-consciously looked at his feet and shuffled back up to the bar.

"Hey fella, you okay?" the bartender asked.

Todd nodded and took another sip from his drink.

"I seen guys get like that from drinkin' their liver away. But I ain't never seen it happen to someone drinkin' water."

Todd shook his head and spoke in a raspy voice. "I did this to myself, but it wasn't through drinking."

"What then?" Todd stared up at him, and the bartender frowned. "If'n you don't mind me askin', that is."

With a sigh, Todd shook his head. He might have minded once, but it wouldn't matter much longer. Soon nothing would. "Every day we make choices. But once in a while we're faced with a choice that's bigger than all the rest. When I came to that point, I made the wrong one. I thought a short, fun life would be better than a long, painful one."

The look on the bartender's face suggested that he didn't really understand. Of course he didn't. How could he? "And what happened?" the bartender asked.

"I had a lot of fun, more than I'd had in all my life. I had the best two weeks ever."

"Two weeks?"

Todd nodded. "That's when I realized that eating hot dogs and having sex wasn't all it was cracked up to be--certainly not worth dying over. Since then I've been living and eating as healthily as possible. I'm the healthiest dying man on the planet." He sighed again and stared into his water. The bartender intelligently left him alone.

A while later Todd heard him talking with another patron. "Did ya hear 'bout this guy? Kills his wife in the middle of a crowded street and then claims it wasn't really him. He actually says someone abducted his body."

Todd looked at the TV and saw a newscast with footage of a minor movie star, Martin Stevenson, being taken away in handcuffs. "What's so unbelievable about that?"

The patron shrugged. "He was seen just half an hour before and admits to being himself then. And one of the foremost experts on mind transfers says it takes longer than that for someone to get accustomed to a new body."

"Who was the expert?"

The bartender smiled, "None other den Margaret O'Connell, the head a the transfer division at Homeostasis Inc. If anyone'd know, it's her."

Todd frowned. "Yes, she would know. But she's lying. I know of at least two Homeostasis Men who could have pulled that off."

"But why would she lie?" the patron asked.

Todd sighed and leaned back. Forgetting he was on a bar stool, he almost fell. "She's worried that another scandal will do serious damage to her company."

"Another scandal?"

"Yeah!" exclaimed the bartender. "Remember, what, six months ago, when they had that pervert working for 'em? He was doin' a homeostasis job for some rich guy and went crazy. He rapes the guy's wife and then kills himself, taking the guy's body with him."

The patron nodded. "I remember now. What was his name? Tim something?"

The bartender shook his head emphatically. "No, I thought it was Tom."

Todd coughed once. "His name was Todd."

* * *

Todd let the bus drive by Homeostasis Inc. The building was dark, with only one light shining in a fourth floor window. That wouldn't be a problem; he was interested in the basement. He pulled the "request stop" cord and got off shortly thereafter. He cut into an alley and, ignoring the guy sleeping in a pile of rubbish, moseyed in the general direction of the building. Anxiety gripped him, making him wish he could run, but his body wasn't up for it. As if on cue, another coughing fit hit and forced him to lean against a wall until it passed. He looked back, but the homeless guy didn't come to investigate.

What am I doing here? What do I hope to achieve? He pushed off from the wall and continued on toward the building's back entrance. Along the way, he thought about Jason Greenwell, one of the two people he knew who had the ability to pull off the murder. Todd had worked with Jason once or twice. Though the kid was a bit of a hothead, he never seemed like the murderous type. Then again, as far as Todd knew, there weren't any other possibilities. Todd hadn't been out of the game long enough for Homeostasis Inc. to train another star operative. And it didn't seem likely that it was someone from one of the other companies. In general, the best people worked for Homeostasis. Todd had never been impressed with anyone he'd met from the other places.

His asking of himself why he was here was rhetorical. These days he didn't have much to do but sit around and wait for death. Appeasing his curiosity as to whether Jason had become a killer seemed a worthwhile use of his time. He reached the back door and idly rested his hand on the entry keypad. It seemed unlikely that his old code would still work, but he'd worked here long enough to pick up a few secrets. Hoping they hadn't changed it, he punched in the six digit skeleton code. The little red light on the pad switched to green. With a mixture of fear and elation, Todd opened the door.

Lights came on in the hallway, giving Todd a momentary start. Then he remembered the motion sensors. This made the lights a cause for relief. They had a ten-minute delay, and only the ones above him were on. He hesitated for a minute. Was the stairway to the left or right? He'd always used the elevator before. A dim memory said to go right, so he strode down the hall, causing the lights to go on for him along the

way.

He saw the door to the stairs just as he felt another coughing fit come on. Figuring people would be less likely to hear him in the stairwell, he raced ahead and had just closed the door behind him when it started. This was a particularly bad attack; when he was done he wiped blood away from his mouth with the back of his hand.

Breathing haggardly, he stumbled down the stairs to the antiseptically clean homeostasis floor. There were four chambers, each with a display window for the viewing pleasure of executives and stockholders. The first two were empty; the third held the body of a woman Todd knew in passing; and the fourth held Jason's body.

Well, he still works here, Todd thought. Now what? I could wait for him outside and confront him when he gets done with his current assignment. But when will that be? I'll need to get a look at his records.

He'd taken one step toward the door marked "Employees Only" when the elevator chimed. Todd's heart skipped a beat. He looked around frantically for a place to hide. The stairs were too far down the hall for his dilapidated body to run to. There was a corner up ahead, but he remembered that it led to a dead end. Still, that was the only place he could go. He rushed around the corner just as he heard the elevator doors open. Fighting to keep his breath quiet, he pasted himself against the wall and hoped unrealistically that whoever it was wouldn't find him.

A single set of feet got off the elevator. The sound was quiet but sharp. Did that make it a smallish woman in high heels? Todd didn't have enough experience as an interloper to be sure. The footsteps went a short distance off the elevator and paused. If she recognized the meaning of the lights being on, Todd was caught for sure. The footsteps started again and seemed to be getting closer. Todd held his breath.

A not unattractive, middle-aged woman walked around the corner, hugging the far wall. Todd recognized her as Margaret O'Connell, his old manager. He let his breath out. At least she wouldn't recognize him.

"It's about time you came back, Todd."

Todd gasped. "How--"

"Come on, Todd. Don't you think we keep images of our clients on file? But I must say, that body looked better when it came in."

Todd coughed once. "The body's--"

She finished his sentence for him, "Sick, yes I know."

"You do?"

She nodded. "Few people know that after we remove a client's consciousness we run a series of tests on the body. Saves in litigation if they try to pull the wool over our eyes."

"So you knew?"

She nodded. "Of course, we didn't know what they were planning. Believe me, Todd, we never would have given you the assignment if we had." She looked back down the hall. "Walk with me, Todd. I want to show you something."

Todd considered for a moment. She'd caught him, but everything seemed to be okay. What could

walking with her hurt? If she'd wanted to subdue him, she could simply have sent some security people down the elevator. But she'd come alone, as if she had been expecting him specifically. Strange.

As they turned the corner he looked her over and saw that she still had no rings on her fingers. He'd always felt sorry for Margaret. Her job meant so much to her that she'd never had any kind of social life outside of it. Yet, despite her hard work, she never seemed to get the promotions she wanted. With a sigh, he said, "I caused a lot of trouble for Homeostasis Inc. I'm sorry."

She nodded. "Yes, you did cause a lot of trouble. But not in the way you think." She opened an "Employees Only" door and motioned for him to go through.

"Well, I saw the congressional hearings on TV. They almost shut the company down."

She waved this aside. "There was never any danger of that. Too many senators and congressmen are our clients. No, what you did that really hurt us was leave."

Todd didn't know what to make of this comment. "Excuse me?"

"Oh, please, Todd. You were the best Homeostasis Man we've ever had. From the second we lost you, I've had management breathing down my neck to find or train a replacement."

The combination of Todd's eminent death and the choices he'd made that had shortened his life had left him extremely depressed. Hearing his old manager sing his praises did wonders for his self-esteem. He stood a little straighter. "Did you find anyone?"

"Sort of, but not really." They went through another door and into a room. There were two chairs in front of a table full of controls. In front of the table was a window overlooking the room Jason's body was in. Margaret sat down in the left chair and motioned Todd toward the right one. It felt good to relax his legs and lower back.

She pointed at the body on the table. "Do you recognize him?"

"Of course. That's Jason Greenwell."

She smiled, "Very good." Then she frowned. "Jason was our one big hope, but he hasn't panned out."

"How's that?"

She held her frown and paused, as if debating whether or not to tell him something. Finally, she said, "It's probably my fault. I pushed him too hard."

Todd's suspicions rising, he asked, "What happened?"

"Well, for one thing, we're pretty sure he's gotten himself mixed up in some sort of drug addiction."

Todd blinked, "While on assignment?"

She hastily replied, "No!" Then, after a pause, she continued more slowly, "Well, at least we don't think so. But even if it was, I don't need to remind you that an addiction is psychological, not physical. So he wouldn't be addicting the client's bodies."

"But, he could be doing damage to them."

She nodded. "It gets worse. He's become irritable and combative with me. I'm getting worried that he'll do something rash while in a client's body."

Todd leaned back and frowned. "I'm afraid he may already have."

She nodded, "So you know about the Stevenson murder."

"I know that if it was a homeostasis job, only two people in the world could have pulled it off."

"And you're one of them."

He nodded.

Margaret turned sheepish, "I have a confession to make. I've been covering up an unauthorized transfer that happened about half an hour before the murder."

"Why?"

"I don't know what to do. After him, we don't have any really good homeostasis men. I've been planning to have the company lawyers represent the movie star. We should be able to get him off. But I can't make public what Jason did."

"Because that would damage the company too much?"

She nodded.

Todd sighed. Then Jason would literally get away with murder. He had the company by the neck and knew it. This was probably just a test, to see how far he could go. What would be next?

Margaret looked to Jason's body lying on the table and then looked back to Todd. Her eyebrows scrunched together, and she looked back to the body and back again to Todd. A sly grin slid across her face.

"What?" Todd asked.

"I just had a thought. It's only a thought, mind you, but think about this. You've got problems, I've got problems, and he's got problems," she pointed at Jason's body. "Your body's dying, I need a good homeostasis man, and Jason's become wild and uncontrollable. We could solve all of our problems by giving you Jason's body and putting him in yours."

Todd's heart rate doubled. He felt perspiration bead on his forehead. To have a healthy body again--to cheat death--this was a chance he could only dream of. But, doing so would be tantamount to killing someone else. Could he do that? Jason was a devious murderer who could evade the law. Didn't justice dictate Todd's course of action? Doubts sprang up, but were immediately beaten down by a particularly bad coughing fit.

* * *

The "Incoming Call" light started blinking, followed by a piercing ring. Todd sat up and acknowledged the call. The viewscreen came to life with Margaret's face. "How are you doing, Todd?"

He shrugged. "The company apartment is nice enough."

"That's not what I was asking about."

Todd nodded. "You were right, Jason was addicted to something. And it was something with an extremely bad low. It's been two days and every inch of the body still cries out for something."

"Can you handle it?"

"Of course. I've handled worse. And I've never seen a reaction like this last more than a few days."

She smiled. "That's good. So, do you feel like jumping back into the saddle?"

"How's that?"

"I've got a cakewalk job for you. Just some guy who wants his body to get used to exercising. Probably nothing but two weeks. Feel up for it?"

Well, he couldn't stay in hiding in the company apartment forever. "Sure, when do you want me to come down to the office?"

"How about today at two?"

He nodded. "Okay, I'll see you then."

She smiled. "It's great to have you back with us, Todd ... I guess I should start calling you 'Jason.'"

With a slight frown, he nodded and terminated the connection. He should have been happier. He had a good body, with nothing but a short-term ailment that was easier to handle than the coughing. There was no death in his immediate future, and he was going back to work doing the things he was good at. So why wasn't he happy?

Because he felt guilty. The previous time he'd gotten his new body through inaction. The donor's own treachery had forced the body upon Todd. This time, he'd actively stolen Jason's body. And the arguments he'd used to convince himself this was right no longer seemed satisfying. Yes, Jason had done very bad things, but that didn't give Todd the right to play judge, jury, and ... executioner. Still, what could he do? Margaret would never consent to giving the body back. She was too pleased to be rid of Jason and have Todd on her payroll again.

"I suppose I'll have to get over it," he said to an empty room.

* * *

The job was as easy as Margaret had promised. The client's body was no different than countless others he'd worked with. They all had their natural homeostasis, an organic resistance to any change, even that for the better, keeping them from exercising. Todd just had to use his strong force of will to work past the resistance and get the body used to being healthy. Then, when he gave it back to its normal inhabitant, the same homeostasis would keep the client from ceasing to exercise.

Todd left the health club and walked around back to where his car waited. It was just starting to get dark and most of the "workout after dinner" crowd was still inside. A chill ran down his spine, giving him the impression that someone was behind him. He looked back over his shoulder, but no one was there. Suppressing a shudder, he picked up his pace a bit. Then he heard the uncontrolled coughing.

Todd's heart fell down into his stomach. Feeling two inches tall, he stopped and turned around. A body he was all too familiar with was leaning against a car and coughing.

Jason held a pistol. Todd knew first hand how weak Jason's body was. And he knew that during a coughing fit it was difficult to focus on anything but breathing. If he moved quickly, he could easily knock the gun out of Jason's hand. But he didn't move. While he'd felt guilty before, standing here watching someone else go through the same pain he'd experienced froze him in his tracks. He hadn't just

condemned Jason to death. He'd sentenced him to lifelong torture as well.

The coughing fit subsided, and Jason pulled himself erect. He waved the gun at Todd and said through gasps, "You're Todd Lucas, aren't you."

Todd nodded.

"I figured it was you she was trolling for."

This confused Todd. "What?"

Jason pointed to the car with the gun. "Please, get in and unlock the rear doors. And don't try anything silly. If my plan doesn't work, I'm dead anyway. I'll happily kill you and then turn the gun on myself."

Todd nodded and did as instructed. Jason got in the back seat and leaned heavily against the cushion, looking exhausted. "Where do you want me to go, Jason?"

"Take I95 south."

They drove in silence for a while. After they got on the expressway, Jason said, "I see why you did it. This is the worst body I've ever been in."

The words blasted into Todd's guilty psyche like bullets fired from the gun. "I'm sorry, Jason. I shouldn't have done it."

"No, you shouldn't have. But I have a feeling there were extenuating circumstances. What did she tell you?"

"What? Who?"

"Margaret. What did she tell you about me?"

Todd didn't look for any ways to escape. He felt so guilty he figured this was his retribution. He also didn't see any reason to lie to Jason. "She said you'd become irritable and insubordinate."

"You would be too if you saw the orders she was giving me."

"And she said you'd become an addict."

"Yes, of course she did. What else?"

Todd sighed. "She gave me enough evidence that I believe you killed Martin Stevenson's wife."

In the rear view mirror, he could see Jason nod. "As I suspected. I don't suppose she told you who my accomplice was?"

"Your accomplice?"

"Well, I suppose it's possible that I drove the van, jumped out, shoved Stevenson in, and then drove off. But who do you think operated the homeostasis controls? I couldn't have done it lying on the table."

Todd hadn't thought about this.

"And let me tell you about the addiction. You've been in my body. You know it's real. But you don't know how I got it."

"How?"

"Well, you're on an assignment right now. And 'your' body is lying on a table in Homeostasis Inc.'s basement being fed by IV. How hard would it be for someone with authority, someone who regularly works late, to take the elevator down and inject something into the IV?"

"You're saying the company addicted you?"

Jason shook his head. "Not the company. One person."

"Margaret? Why?"

"Because not everyone enjoys his work as much as you used to. I was getting tired of always living the worst part of people's lives. But when I told Margaret I was thinking about retiring soon, it infuriated her. She screamed and yelled that I was letting her down and how in the hell was she supposed to replace me? No one really likes the job, and no one below me was particularly good at it. When she got her composure back, she asked if money was the issue. I told her that while a good raise would slow my departure, it wouldn't make me happy."

"So what happened?"

"I got a raise, and shortly thereafter, I got an addiction. And it's a nasty drug too. Serious highs, incredible lows. And they kept giving it to me. At the end of an assignment I almost always came back to a high body."

"But, what was the point?"

"She told me it's a drug their lab invented. Not only is Homeostasis Inc. the only place I'll find it, but the traces it's left in my the system will cause my body to react badly to any other drugs I might take to cover it. They were hoping to force me to stay."

"What did you do?"

Jason took a minute to collect his breath. He leaned forward and said, "Take the next exit and turn right." Then he leaned back and continued. "I started making her job difficult. I broke one client's finger and I started treating the client's loved ones with, well, less than professional behavior." He patted Todd on the shoulder, "But, no, old buddy, I didn't rape anyone's wife."

Todd grumbled, "It didn't happen like that."

"Hey, I believe you. But most people think otherwise. Maybe something similar happened to me. Turn left at the light."

Todd noticed that they were in movie start country. He turned left and said, "But you still killed someone." In the rear view mirror, he saw Jason smile.

"Maybe."

"What do you mean, maybe?"

"Well, last month a rumor that you were still alive ran through the company. And, right after that, she stopped yelling at me. Then, one day, she told me that they had me on drug possession. If I didn't do what she said, I'd go to jail forever. You know how the drug laws are, it's worse to own a few grams than to kill someone."

Todd was having trouble believing any of this. Margaret had always put a lot of emphasis on her career, but murder seemed over the top. "What did she tell you to do?"

"Left at the stop sign. She gave me this crazy plan where the two of us would abduct Stevenson, I'd take over his body, and kill his wife in public. When I asked why, she told me I was to do what she said and not ask questions."

Todd frowned. "Why do you think she wanted you to do it?"

He coughed once. "Seems pretty obvious from where I sit. No one would believe Stevenson when he said it wasn't him. But three people on the planet knew the job was possible."

Todd didn't like where this was going. "And those three people are Margaret O'Connell, Jason Greenwell--"

Jason completed the sentence for him, "And Todd Lucas. She knew that if you were alive, your life would be pretty pointless by now. She did it to catch you."

Todd's mind raced. This was a crazy story, even if it did fit the facts. "But damn it, Jason. Even if she premeditated the murder, it was you who pulled the trigger. I won't buy the 'my boss ordered me to' argument."

"And you shouldn't. Now, slow down. Our destination is coming up. There, 9236. Pull into that driveway."

Todd did as instructed. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

They pulled up to a nice, moderately expensive house. An attractive woman in tight clothes immediately came out. She looked agitated. Jason said, "I'm leaving the gun back here. You've got to be at least curious what's going on. Just play along here and I'll let you go after that, I promise."

Todd looked back at him, studying his face. Jason held his stare evenly, without a hint of guilt. Todd nodded, and they both got out of the car.

The woman angrily said, "You two had better be working for Mr. Greenwell, because this is not what we agreed to. My husband's been in jail too long."

Todd blinked. "What?"

Jason immediately said, "Mary, don't worry. I checked on him today. He's fine."

She crossed her arms and tapped her foot. "And who are you?"

Jason nodded. "I'm the friend Jason told you about. The one with contacts in Hollywood. The producer of a new big-budget prison film is intrigued by our little publicity stunt. He said that if it goes over well, he's interested in talking to Martin about the lead part."

Her entire demeanor changed from anger to hopeful elation. "Really?"

Jason nodded. "So play your part very well and get to your husband quickly so you can explain everything."

"When?"

"Tomorrow."

She smiled and quickly hugged both Jason and Todd, saying "Thank you" through tears. They nodded and got into the car.

As Todd pulled out, Jason asked, "Does, 'maybe' make more sense now?"

Todd nodded. "So, when you learned what Margaret wanted you to do, you went to the wife and told her about this publicity stunt."

"Right. But her husband's not that great an actor, and she knows it. So we decided not to tell him. Later, everyone will marvel at how good his acting was when he got caught." Another coughing fit hit him.

The guilt now weighed on Todd like a heavy chain around his neck. When Jason's coughing subsided, Todd said, "My God, Jason, I'm sorry."

Jason made shushing sounds, then said, "You were naive and let an excruciating amount of pain cloud your judgment. It's Margaret who's the real evil one."

"So, what do we do?"

"Well, I'd like my own body back, and she needs to be punished. She's working late tonight. Tomorrow when the news about Stevenson breaks, she'll be suspicious. But tonight we've got some latitude."

"But, Jason, even before tonight I've been feeling guilty about stealing your body. How am I going to handle stealing hers?"

Jason leaned back. "I'll tell you what. We do this tonight and you start going through her files. See what she's been doing to her employees since you left. I think you'll realize things will be better for a lot of people with you as her."

"But I'd have to transfer into woman. We're not even sure that'll work."

"Yes, we are. I've done it many times."

"But the laws say--"

"Margaret told me to kill someone. How much do you think she pays attention to the laws?"

Todd thought about it carefully. In the end, he realized that Margaret as Margaret would never allow him to give Jason his body back. But Todd as Margaret could. With a sigh, he said, "Okay."

* * *

Todd burst into the office. "Margaret, thank God you're still here!"

With a considerable amount of concern, she asked, "Todd? What's wrong?"

"I'm having some sort of reaction. It's almost as if the body is rejecting me. I tried to transfer myself out, but couldn't run the controls by myself." He rushed around her desk and grabbed her wrists. "We need to transfer me out of this body!"

"Okay, Todd. It'll be okay." She stood and Todd rushed her to the elevator. Inside, she asked, "Todd, I'm not aware of any body ever rejecting a transfer. Do you have any idea what's going on?"

Todd shook his head, then grabbed it with both hands and grimaced. "No. But there's a humming coming from inside my head. It's making me woozy and causing my senses to act strangely. I can't take much more of this."

"Well, we'll have you out in no time. Don't worry."

When they reached the ground floor he hurried her through the door and into the control rooms. She stopped when they reached the room Jason's true body should have been in. Todd's old body was on the table instead of Jason's. "What's going on here?"

One of the chairs spun around, revealing Jason in his own body, pointing the gun at her. "Hi Margie. Don't worry, we're just playing a small game of musical bodies. We're going to put you into Todd's old body. Then I'll put Todd into yours and Todd'll put me into the one he's currently in. I'll finish off his job, he'll be my manager, and you'll live out the rest of your life in the body you trapped us both in."

Todd frowned. "What do you mean, 'trapped us both?'"

Jason smiled. "I didn't tell you everything. When you check her records you'll learn that not only did she know the condition of that body when it came in, but she knew what was going to happen. She let it go through anyway. She figured that when you came back you'd be so indebted to her for saving you from an early death, you'd do anything she asked forever. Isn't that right, Margie?"

She snarled. "You can't do this, Jason."

Todd grabbed her by the arm. "Is it true?"

She looked up at him, snarled and tried to pull her arm away. Todd held on tighter. He hadn't seen remorse in her eyes. *He had* seen guilt. The last six months of pain and agony were nothing but an exercise in building company loyalty? He now realized that he wouldn't feel guilt in taking her body from her. He tightened his grip on her arm and dragged her toward the door to the transfer room.

"I won't let you two get away with this," she yelled. "I'll tell everyone what's going on here."

Jason grinned. "If you do, we'll just tell them you're Todd Lucas. It would be ironic if you ended up living out the remainder of your life in jail for a crime that was, in effect, your fault."

* * *

Todd, now in Margaret's body, drove her sport utility vehicle. Margaret, in Todd's old body, sat tied up in the back seat. Todd was having some trouble getting used to the strange sensations he was getting from being a woman, but he was in enough control to drive.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"We're going far enough away that your face won't be recognizable to anyone. Yes, you might come back to town, but by then I'll have already assumed your identity well enough that they'll believe me over you." At least he kept telling himself he'd be able to handle this. He just hadn't convinced himself yet.

A coughing fit hit, but Todd didn't feel guilty as he watched her body wracked by spasms. Instead he felt angry for all the times those spasms had hit him. When it passed, he asked, "Why, Margaret? Why take the risk? If you really wanted my services, why risk losing me? Too many things could have gone wrong with your plan."

Depressed, she responded. "Even back then, I was already starting to lose Jason. I knew it would only

be a matter of time before I lost you too."

"But so many things could have gone wrong. I might have died."

She shook her head. "That was a risk, but I had a lot of faith in you, Todd. I knew you'd pull through. I just didn't realize how well."

How well? He *was* getting a third start on life. And he had more opportunity this time than the previous two put together. Yet there were some extremely strange minuses, not the least of which was living in the body of the opposite sex. The homeostasis involved with *that* change was greater than any he'd ever faced. Still, his previous two bodies have given him more force of will than just about anyone on the planet. If anyone could put this third chance to good use, it was Todd Lucas. He set his face into the kind of pensive frown he used to see Margaret use and drove on in silence.

The End

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