Insomnia had always plagued Howard. Thoughts of alternate realities where he'd made some different, abstract decisions constantly swirled around his mind. What if he hadn't pressed Chuck to retire, what if he'd pushed harder to make Kim a partner, or if he'd fought to hire Jimmy as an attorney after he'd passed the bar. He never had been a very good lawyer. His arguments always fell flat.

These days though, there was only one scenario being turned over.

What if he'd said no to his father when he'd been '*offered*' the position at the firm? What if he hadn't been deathly afraid of losing his fathers approval?

That 'what if' had been snowballing further recently, picking up speed until it was big enough to block out any and all other thoughts. What would he do once he was no longer afraid of his father? Would he have gone into criminal defense law as he'd originally planned? Would he have started his own private practice and tried to make a name for himself without riding the coattails of his father?

Would he finally have the courage to try on the pencil skirt he'd been given as a joke from his frat mates when he'd passed the bar?

That particular thought made him feel sick to his stomach. He didn't want to, but he couldn't stop himself from picturing it. Same tailored suit, with a skirt and pantyhose instead of pants. Sensible heels that would clack against the wooden floors of the courthouse. Would he grow his hair out? Change his name?

Would he finally feel comfortable in his skin, despite the stares he knows he'd get?

Since joining Hamlin McGill, he'd been constantly forced into playing some role or other. First, it was the dutiful son, following in his fathers footsteps. Then once he'd made partner (a position he'd never felt he'd deserved), he'd had to take on the less interesting or more annoying cases, his father and Chuck doling out their leftovers after divvying up the more high profile clients between themselves. After his father retired, he became Chuck's whipping boy, delivering all the hard news because *Chuck* wanted everyones admiration.

Now they were both gone, and he was just an empty shell.

Cheryl stirred in her sleep beside him. Yet another victim of his father's control. They'd been introduced at a party his father had held before he'd retired, the daughter of one of their more affluent clients. Craving his father's approval still, he'd taken the hint and flirted. He knew how handsome others found him, so it hadn't taken much for her to take the bait and return his interest. Now, years later, the additional bedrooms they'd bought the place for, dreaming of future children, remained untouched. They'd barely spoken since Chuck's death, and even before that he found it hard to make conversation with her. They lived entirely separate lives, tied together only by the bed they shared.

More often than not, he left that too, unable to fall asleep even with sleeping pills and bedtime routines and the godforsaken *mindfulness* his doctor kept telling him to practice.

She shifted again and sighed in her sleep. Howard eased himself out of bed slowly, trying his best not to disturb her. The bedroom door closed with a *click* behind him, and he padded barefoot down the hallway and into his office. He sat at his desk and clicked on the small lamp, but he took no notice of the papers strewn across the surface. Instead he unlocked his bottom drawer and, with a little finesse, removed the false bottom built seamlessly into the wood.

Tucked away in the little hiding spot was a simple card, the cheesy line reading "Wishing you *CLUCK*!" with the image of a chick surrounded by pieces of shell underneath. Howard picked up the old card and opened it, taking care of its worn and delicate edge.

Dear Howie, the message read. *Wishing you all the best for the future. I HOPE you find what you're looking for. All my love, Cherry.*

Hope. A name from another life. He'd taken the path marked *Abandon all hope, ye who enter...* and left her behind.

Was it too late to go back? Or was he in too deep, trapped by the prison of sunk cost fallacy he'd erected around himself. He sometimes saw her on the rare occasion he was able to fall asleep. A halo of tight blonde curls around her head. Practical suit with a tight pencil skirt. She was always smiling at him with a grin he could no longer bare to force. Unrecognisable to the miserable sack of skin he was dragging around these days.

Maybe one day.

Maybe.