

The Road to Hell

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Josh Ryan was not normal. He talked different, walked different, laughed different... and everyone *knew* it. He had two very close friends who always wanted to help him; in fact, throughout his young life, he *always* had people around who wanted to help him... usually to fend off his parents who seemed like they would do *anything* for him. *Their* desire to help however, often made his own life take a back seat to their ideas of why he was so different and who he should become as a result... "for his own good." Determined to raise Josh 'their way' and according to their own ideas of who he is, it would take extreme circumstances and more pain than Josh ever thought a person could endure for anyone to even begin to see the damage his parents were doing to his childhood, his future, and in the end, his very life... all "with the best of intentions."

Set in northeastern Ohio in the mid-to-late 2000s, *The Road to Hell* tells the story of a boy whose parents try to make him be something he isn't and can never be, all to satisfy their own ideals and beliefs, and the havoc they create in the process. However well meaning, their efforts only serve to make their son a victim of 'learned helplessness' and to seek out the easiest path in life, rather than fight for what he believes in. A dark tale of idealism, extremism, and ideology versus reality, where the greatest question in life can be brought to bear: "Who am I?" The book takes no stance on right or wrong or the moral questions that plague our time. It merely tries to engage the reader into questioning if their own deeply held beliefs, no matter how firmly they may believe them to be good, fair, or even righteous and holy, are in fact just well intentioned tyranny.

This book is dedicated to my wife, Rachel.

You inspire me to be more than I thought possible,
to live life more full of fun and joy than I knew achievable,
and not take any moment of this precious gift called life for granted.

You never tried to put me in a box; you tore down my walls.

"We love because He first loved us."

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128,909 words

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Introduction

Nobody likes their own flaws pointed out. *Nobody*. It's an almost universal human *fact* that when someone draws attention to the things we find most distasteful about ourselves, we rail against the accusation, *especially* when we know it to be true. I'm no exception. After I wrote the story of my life, *For God So Loved the World...*, I found myself examining my own points of view and those of my parents, and found myself finding more and more sympathy with their perspective.

With this rolling around in my head, I started thinking about my favorite author, Robert Heinlein. He is, to my mind, the best storyteller of all time. Not necessarily the best author... but the best *storyteller*. I know this to be true because of one thing: in his life, he managed to piss off just about *everybody* at one point in time or another. It takes a good storyteller to make people care that much. When he wrote *Stranger in a Strange Land*, conservatives and Christians criticized him for daring to question the basic ideas of monogamy and organized religion. Not even challenging them or saying they were bad, but just for *questioning* them. Then he turned right around and torqued-off all the liberals by writing *Starship Troopers* and questioning the idea of universal suffrage. Only one thing was for certain from the man... he sold a *lot* of books that asked a *lot* of questions.

I started to think about my own experiences, those of my parents, and played some 'what if' games in my head. "*What if they were more accepting of me when I was younger?*" My life would have been completely different, for certain... but would it have been *better*? Then I read a short story by Heather Rose Brown entitled, *I Ain't Gay!* and my brain went into overdrive. The story was a humorous romp about a transgender girl whose parents think she's gay and are just a little *over* supportive... to the point of insistence. It can make for a funny story, but there was a darker undercurrent in the telling. Suddenly, I found myself thinking of a completely *different* 'what if' scenario.

What if a perfectly normal boy had LGBT activist parents who were convinced he's transgender and tried to force it on him, the same way many

stories depict parents trying to force their gay children to be straight or transgendered children to be 'normal'? The terrifying course of events that went through my head left me shaking, I was so upset. For people who believe in the rights of others to love who they want and to be true to their own identity... no matter how well intentioned they may be... there can be darker, even close-minded and totalitarian-fascist, aspects of their fervor.

I am neither a hard-line social conservative nor a socialist liberal, but a conservative libertarian. I believe in the rights of people to be free from the oppression of their own government... *and* their neighbors... both social and financial. Heinlein might define me as a 'Rational Anarchist', if anyone gets that reference. To me, *any* activist parent, one who pushes their child to be transgender or gay, or pushes them to be cisgendered or straight, are *equally* bad. (if you think it can't happen, that no parent could do that, read this link: <https://poptopic.com.au/lifestyle/fashion/16-year-old-boy-shares-his-story-about-being-forced-to-be-trans-by-mother/>) Heather Rose Brown put it best in a short story she wrote. "*Nobody* gets to decide who you are, except *you*."

One final note. If you're the type of person who is easily offended by having your political and personal opinions shown in a negative light, regardless of which side of the aisle you sit on, this story is not for you. I don't outright criticize *anyone's* opinions here, political or otherwise, but the entire point is to call into question *why* people have them, if they truly serve the purpose for which they were gained, and if they have outlived their usefulness. If this story offends your sensibilities, then I would suggest you take a good long look at just what it is that upset you, and try and determine if it's perhaps because you already know your default position is indefensible. Maybe you already know you're wrong, and are overreacting to someone pointing out the *possibility* that it's the case, not even outright disagreeing with you.

Just some food for thought.

Roberta Elder (Proud to be a pro-military, libertarian, conservative, Christian, transgender, lesbian, polyamorist... puzzle *that* one out!)

Prologue

Josh's eyebrows scrunched up in confusion as he opened the box and looked inside. His fifth birthday party had been fun so far. The cake, while not his favorite chocolate, was good, the bicycle his parents had gotten him was just itching to be ridden, and the other toys he'd gotten were exactly what he'd wanted. Now in utter confusion, he could just stare at the last gift he'd opened.

"What's *this*?" he asked innocently.

Melanie Ryan smiled at her five-year-old. "What does it *look* like, Josh?"

Still confused, he looked up at his mother hesitantly. Her narrow face was still smiling at him expectantly; her short sandy blonde hair pulled back by the headband she wore. Likewise, her brown eyes, so much like his own, looked at him curiously to see how he felt about the toy. "Um... a *doll*?"

Fred Ryan nodded at his son as his five foot nine, thin-framed body towered over the boy. He smiled gently at his son; his dark hair pulled back into a ponytail and his green eyes looking at him expecting to see him equally happy with his last toy as he was with his first. "That's *right*, Josh! Isn't it nice?"

Picking up the doll from out of the box, Josh stared at it as though it might suddenly grow fangs and try to bite him. "Why do I get a *doll*?"

"Why *not*?" his mother replied happily as she got down on the floor with her child. She knew from her child psychology courses that her five-foot six body standing over him would be too intimidating to really connect with him as an equal. "I had dolls when *I* was your age! You used to *love* your old Raggedy Anne doll! You slept with her for *years*! Isn't she pretty?" Reaching out, Melanie ran her fingers along the lace of the doll's pink dress.

"I *guess*." Josh replied confusedly. Setting the gift aside, he walked on his knees toward his mother and gave her a hug, just as he'd done after opening each of his other presents. "Thank you, Mommy." he stated, but without the enthusiasm he'd shown earlier. Getting up on his feet, he repeated the procedure with his father, Fred. "Thank you, Daddy."

Still perplexed, Josh looked back at the doll, shrugged, went over to it, picked it up, and examined it. He had to admit it was a nice doll, but it held no interest for him. *Why did they give me a doll?* he wondered. *I didn't ask for one... and I know I don't need one...* He puzzled over the question as he took the doll to his room. Putting it with his other gifts, he shrugged and turned to go get the bike helmet so his dad could teach him how to ride his bike. *Parents are weird!*

Chapter 1 - Natural Assumptions

A smile broke across Josh's face as he approached the bus stop. The cool air of the September morning stung his nose slightly, but it didn't detract from the happiness he felt at going back to school again. Unlike a lot of the boys in his class, Josh loved school. Now that he was going to Junior High, he would even be going to school with his two best friends, Tracy and David Edwards. He always thought it was silly that just because they lived two blocks over they had to go to completely different Primary and Intermediate schools. Stepping up his approach to a light jog, he couldn't wait to see them.

"Hi, guys!" he shouted as he neared the two siblings. "*Great* morning, huh?"

David looked at him as though he'd just suggested that lying in front of the bus tires as it approached was a great idea. "What, going back to *school*? Oh yeah... *great* day! What're you some sort of *weirdo*?"

Josh knew his friend well enough to know that David wasn't being serious, so instead he just smiled widely at the boy's remark. "Yeah! Wanna *make* somethin' of it?" As Josh got closer and slowed to a walk, he stood right in front of the boy and flexed slightly before the two burst out into laughter and embraced like the good friends they were. "You're so full of it, Dave!"

The two separating, Josh turned to Tracy. "Hi, Trace. How was *your* summer camp?" He hadn't seen Tracy since the fraternal twins' twelfth birthday in mid-July, right before the three were sent to their respective summer camps.

Tracy laughed at their inside joke. "It was *fine*, Josh! I had a lot of fun! I don't need to ask how *your* summer camp was though, *do* I?"

Rolling his eyes, Josh scoffed. "No!" Turning to David, he held up his hands in mock surrender. "No *offense*, Dave!"

David shook his head. "None taken, Josh. *I* know the score."

Seeing the bus coming to pick them up, Josh leaned in close to Tracy's ear conspiratorially. "Can I talk to you on the bus? Just you and me? *Please?*"

Hearing the desperation in her best friend's voice, Tracy nodded knowingly. "I'll tell Davie. He can sit with Mark. He *likes* Mark, and I think the feeling is mutual!"

Rolling his eyes, Josh nodded and smiled, happy for his friend. "That's cool. *Thanks!*" he whispered.

The three lined up with the other students, while Tracy leaned forward and whispered in her twin's ear. David nodded and smiled, seeing Mark already on the bus and sitting alone. Loading in, Tracy found an empty seat and swept in gracefully, tucking her skirt under her to sit by the window. She wrinkled her nose at the scent that seemed to come standard on all school busses; a fetid mixture of vinyl, diesel fumes, and children's sweat. As Josh moved to sit next to her, Reggie stood up from the seat behind her.

"Sit elsewhere, *fairy!*" he snorted. "*I* wanna sit next to Tracy!"

Closing his eyes, Josh stopped just short of sitting down at the sound of his nemesis, Reginald Hughes. Standing back up straight, he turned around with a false smile on his lips. "*Reggie!* Amazing to see you survived summer without major head trauma! I see you're up to using multisyllabic insults this year! Take it by correspondence?" The quizzical look on the larger boy's face told Josh he'd far exceeded the bully's vocabulary.

"Huh? That supposed to be some sissy fag insult, *queer-boy?*" he sneered as he pushed Josh's shoulder aggressively.

"*Reginald Hughes!*" the bus driver shouted. "Sit back down in the seat you were in before! Or do I have to revoke your bus privileges on the first day of school?" Mary Cartwright knew most of these children well. Only two years earlier she'd been driving them to Primary School before she'd been

moved to Middle School duty, and Reggie had always been a troublemaker. "Or maybe you'd prefer to be driven to school by your *mommy*?"

Turning ashen as the threat hit home, Reggie slowly sank back into his seat, duly mortified as the other kids laughed at the idea of the toughest kid in the neighborhood being driven to school by his mother.

Finally taking his seat next to Tracy, Josh blew out a sigh of relief. "*That* was close!" he breathed. Waiting for the bus to get moving, Josh fidgeted nervously.

"Must be *important*." Tracy whispered. "Just calm down, take a breath, and tell me when you're *ready*. OK?"

Nodding rapidly as the bus began to move down the street, he leaned in close to his best friend. "They're *at* it again." was all he said.

Groaning, Tracy shook her head in disbelief. "*Again*? I thought you said you were gonna have a talk with them this summer?"

"I *did*!" Josh exclaimed. "For all the *good* it did! They just have their own ideas and nothing *I* say can change their minds!"

"Just tell me what happened." Tracy sighed.

Standing uncomfortably at the pick up area in front of the summer camp where he'd spent the last six weeks, Josh waited impatiently for his parents to pick him up. Watching the other kids hug their parents and seeing them so happy, he frustratedly kicked a small stone away and watched it tumble along the dirt driveway. Dust, pine trees, and the sweet scent of the nearby lake mingled with the jarring odors of hot tires and car exhaust. Steeling his resolve, he promised himself that this would absolutely be his last summer at this camp.

After all, *he mused*, I'm twelve now. I think I should have a say as to which summer camp I go to, at least. *Taking a breath, he spotted his parents' VW Microbus slowly pattering its way up the driveway. It was bad enough they seemed to think they were sixties flower children, even though they weren't born until the seventies, but the way they treated him seemed to drive him more and more crazy every year. Even the summer camp they sent him to seemed to be an effort to force their opinions of just who they thought their son was.*

As soon as the vehicle shuddered and squealed to a stop, Melanie jumped out of the passenger seat and ran up to him. "Baby! I missed you!"

Smiling weakly, Josh returned the affection and even found himself slightly tearing up with his mother's loving embrace. He knew he was loved, that much was certain.

Pulling away and seeing him wipe a tear out of his eye with his sleeve, she smiled wistfully at him. "Have a good summer?" she asked.

"It was alright." Josh said as his father Fred came walking up. "I didn't get to see Dave much, though. He was in different activities than me this year."

"Oh?" Fred asked, curiously.

Shaking his head, the boy sighed. "No. Dave was in water-skiing, archery, hiking, football, and baseball this year." Lucky stiff! he thought.

"Huh." Fred furrowed his brow. "Oh well." Picking up his son's pack, he slung it over one shoulder as Melanie grabbed his suitcase. "Come on then, pumpkin!" he said as he headed back to the Microbus. "Let's get you home!"

Sighing at the term of endearment his father had been calling him for as long as he could remember, Josh followed them to the waiting relic of automotive mockery his parents had spent a small fortune keeping running year after

year. The entire back of the vehicle was covered in bumper stickers that professed "COEXIST", "Save the Whales", "Dukakis/Bentsen for President", and a hundred other causes they'd supported over the last twenty years. Watching as several of the campers climbed into the camp's courtesy bus for inner-city kids to be driven back to Cleveland, Josh laughed as he thought, They get to go home in the camp bus, while I go home in the camp-aign bus! He would have found his joke funnier if his mood was better.

Climbing in and placing his backpack and suitcase in the back, Josh settled into the back seat and waited for the long drive home.

Just as they began to pull out of the dirt driveway, Melanie turned to Josh. "So... since you didn't get to spend much time with Davie this year, did you meet any new boys you liked, sweetie?"

Sighing in frustration, Josh blinked slowly as he reluctantly nodded his head. "There were a few cool guys I hung out with some." he admitted. "Not that I like-liked them, though."

Seeing an almost look of disappointment on his mother's face, he saw it vanish just as quickly and melt into a smile.

"That's alright." his father offered from the driver's seat. "It's OK if you didn't 'connect' with anyone new! You still have Davie!"

"I don't have Dave, Daddy!" Josh almost fumed. "He and I are just friends, like I keep telling you!"

Fred looked briefly over at his wife, who returned the knowing glance and secret smile. "Sure, pumpkin! Just friends!"

Hours later, after having been grilled by his parents about his entire summer, Josh was relieved to see his own neighborhood as his parents griped about something President Bush had done last week. He wasn't even listening. All

he could think about was getting back to school next Tuesday and spending time with his best friends.

When the van chugged into the Ryan family's driveway, finally squealing to a stop, Josh was immediately out the door with his backpack and suitcase, running to the door with his key already in hand; inside before his father had even gotten out of the vehicle. Racing upstairs to his room, he just wanted to unpack, shower, wash his clothes, and check his computer for messages. He had a cell phone, a Motorola Razor, but neither of his friends were much into the new fad of texting, so most of his communications were by email.

Charging into his room, Josh suddenly stopped and looked around. Backing up, he stood outside the room and looked up and down the short hallway, almost as though he expected to find himself in the wrong house. Edging back in, he blinked in confusion as he surveyed the now unfamiliar place he'd slept in all his life.

The walls had been painted and many of his posters removed, except for those that he loved the most. His old movie posters were still there, now hung in very nice glass cases. His furniture had also been replaced with what looked to be a matched set of antique-style white painted wood. New plush carpet that blended well with the new walls adorned the floor, and his bed had a new coverlet and pillows; his few stuffed animals decorating the head, just where he'd left them.

After Melanie came up the stairs behind him, much more sedately, she paused to stand next to him and placed her hands on his shoulders lovingly. "What do you think, Josh? Nice?"

Blinking with his mouth hanging open, he couldn't tear his eyes off the sight in front of him. "It's... um... it's very... pink!"

Sighing with satisfaction, Melanie nodded. "A lovely shade, don't you think? Do you like it? I picked out the furniture myself! Do you like your new bed?"

His eyes still wide with shock, he looked at the piece of furniture he would be sleeping on tonight. "A canopy bed? Really?"

Grinning happily, Melanie beamed as Fred joined them. "Uh-huh! I think it totally sets the tone of the rest of the room!"

"What do you think of your posters, Josh?" Fred asked hopefully. "That was my part! I was very careful not to damage any of them, I know how hard you worked, saved, and searched to find them! I found authentic movie theater display frames to mount them in!"

Still stunned to near speechlessness, he nodded. "Uh... yeah, Daddy. They... they look great." It was the only thing he liked about the change to his room. Shaking off his initial reaction, he took a good look around. Most of his things were still there, but the room itself defied description. Turning to his parents who looked back at him expectantly, he shook his head. "Why?"

"We wanted to surprise you, pumpkin." his father answered happily.

"Why pink?" he asked more sternly.

"Why not pink?" his mother retorted with her usual dismissal. "Pink is a beautiful color!"

"But..." He stopped himself from saying 'pink is for girls' as he knew that was a non-starter with his parents. They were firm believers that there was no such thing as 'gender specific' anything, least of all colors. "But I don't really like pink!"

"Oh!" his mother waved her hand. "You like pink just fine! Three of your shirts are pink, and you picked them out yourself!"

"They're salmon, not pink!" he corrected her. "This..." he gestured to the room, "is pink! And that..." he pointed at the bed, "...is a girl's canopy bed!"

"Beds aren't gender specific." Fred corrected him. "They're for sleeping on."

Finally beyond his breaking point, Josh lost control. "It's a girl's bed, Daddy! The coverlet has little hearts and rainbows on it!"

"Don't take that tone with your father!" Melanie snapped before quickly composing herself. "Josh, I think it would be best if we all went down to the kitchen, made up a nice pot of tea, and discussed this calmly. Your father and I have a lot to talk to you about."

Too flustered to think straight, Josh knew that his mother's suggestion was reasonable, and it would give him the opportunity to voice his objections to certain things his parents had been pushing on him the last seven years. "OK... fine!" he answered in a restrained growl. "We'll talk."

After the caffeine-free tea was heated up, the three sat together in silence while they each looked to one another; Melanie and Fred looking at each other and Josh concernedly with Josh staring daggers at them both. Fred took a deep breath and began it. "Josh, we think it's time we face some facts about you. You're not like other little boys."

"I'm not a 'little boy'!" Josh shot back angrily at the suggestion he was still a baby. I'm twelve! Practically a teenager! he grumbled to himself.

"We know." Melanie said softly. "Though I'm glad to see that you've finally decided to be honest with us."

Confused, Josh's anger melted for a moment. "Honest? Honest about what?"

Fred smiled patiently. "That you're transgendered." he answered with a sigh. "It's OK. We love you no matter what!"

His eyes squinted in confusion. "Trans-what?" He knew what the word meant, he was just confused as to why they'd apply it to him.

"Transgendered, sweetie." Melanie explained. "It's the proper term for someone like you... someone who, through no fault of their own, feels like they were born in the wrong body. We know you should have been a girl... that being a girl is what will make you happy!"

"It was obvious, really." Fred took over explaining their reasoning. "All the signs were there the whole time. Your love of musicals, the way you keep your room so neat and clean, the way you take to school, your lack of interest in sports, how much you love your BFF Tracy, your relationship with Davie. Honestly pumpkin, it's our fault we didn't see it sooner!"

His father continued as Josh's eyes widened. "We... that is, your mother and I... we thought that you were just gay, and we were totally OK with that! But you've been so insistent that you aren't, we started looking for alternative explanations. Then we started talking with some psychologist colleagues of your mother's who specialize in gender issues, and it turns out that you're probably not gay... you're just a girl... and that's OK, too!"

"So, your father and I decided to surprise you with your room!" his mother picked up where he left off. "You didn't even get a chance to see the best part! You didn't look in the closet, sweetie!"

Stunned into utter disbelief, Josh believed his parents had finally flipped out. "You... you think I'm trans? That I want to be a girl?" Seeing them nod happily, not even seeming to notice his negative reaction to the idea, Josh stood slowly from the table. "I... I need to go for a walk." he stammered.

"Very well, sweetheart!" Melanie smiled sweetly as she and Fred stood as well. "Take your time. We know this is a lot to absorb! When you come back, we'll talk some more." Moving to hug him, she was surprised when he pushed her away and ran for the door.

Running in a near panic, Josh made his way down to the park two blocks away. Sitting on a picnic table bench alone, he tried to fully process what

his parents were telling him. Me? A girl? He honestly examined his feelings for nearly an hour before making up his mind. Walking home defiantly, he strode into the living room feeling sure of himself.

"Welcome back, sweetheart!" Melanie glowed. "Feeling better about things?"

"No." he answered bluntly as he crossed his arms. "I am not a girl!"

Her smile melting slowly, Melanie had fully expected Josh to return with a happier outlook, and maybe even ready to share his 'true' name with them. Confused, she furrowed her brow. "I don't understand. Are you just asexual? You don't have to use the word girl sweetie, if it makes you uncomfortable. You can use whatever..."

"I'm a boy, Mom!" he interrupted her. "A perfectly normal, one hundred percent, fully male and masculine, boy!"

Fred rose from his easy chair and looked at Josh. "Now listen. We won't get anywhere with you unwilling to listen to reason, pumpkin!"

"Stop calling me pumpkin, Daddy!" he retorted. "It's humiliating!"

Melanie nodded at Fred. "She's right, dear. Terms like that are degrading for a young woman, even from her father."

"But I've always called her pumpkin!" he countered. "It's..."

"Stop calling me 'she' and 'her'!" Josh shouted.

"Don't interrupt, sweetheart!" Melanie said with a mildly raised voice.

"We're trying to really communicate here! Would you prefer a more gender-neutral term?"

"No one's communicating because no one's listening to me!" Josh whined.

Fred's temper, not often piqued, came to a slow boil. "Now see here, young lady! Your mother and I worked hard for weeks researching all about this situation! We know you're young and don't really understand what's going on, but we know what's best for you!"

Pacing like a caged tiger, Josh was desperate to make his parents listen. "By turning me into a girl? That's what's best for a boy like me? To be utterly humiliated?"

"That's enough!" Fred shouted. "I'll not have you talking that way about transgendered people, even if you are one! It's not humiliating to have gender dysphoria, and I'll have no such talk in this house! Go to your room!"

Narrowing his eyes at his parents, Josh fumed at their stubborn refusal to listen. Storming off in a huff, he stomped his way up the stairs and into his room, slamming the door behind him. Now realizing he was confined to a room that looked like a pre-teen girl's dream come true, Josh didn't even know where to sit. Remembering something his mother said, he nervously made his way over to the closet and, with trembling hand, slid the mirrored door to one side.

It was no less than he expected, but seeing it in his room made him almost nauseous with fear. He knew then that his parents were going to make him comply with their absurd notions that he was a girl in the most visible way possible. They were going to make him wear the closet full of dresses, skirts, and blouses that had taken the place of all of his old clothes.

"No!" Tracy gasped. "They didn't!"

*Nodding helplessly, Josh sighed. "They did. You'd love it! They got me all the latest fashions! The place is like a girly paradise! Like an un-Lucky Charm box... all hearts, rainbows, and marshmallow pink! And I'm in hell! It was bad enough when they thought I was a co-star in *Rent*, now they want me to play the lead in *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*!"*

Thinking a moment, Tracy dared ask what only she or David could without hurting Josh's feelings. "Do you think they could be *right*?"

Looking over at her, Josh could see the sincere look of concern in her eyes. He knew Tracy wasn't teasing him, she honestly was wondering what he felt. Sniffing back a tear and swallowing the lump in his throat, he shrugged and shook his head. "When they first suggested the idea, I went down to the park and really thought about it, seriously, for over an hour. I know I'm kind of a weirdo for a boy." Seeing Tracy about to object, he forestalled her rebuttal. "I *know*, you think I'm just *fine*... but you *know* I'm not like the other guys. Let's stop kidding ourselves."

Tracy sighed as the bus approached the school. "OK, I'll admit you're... *different*... but different doesn't mean weird! It's just... you're *unique*!"

"So's a square bowling ball!" Josh sighed.

"...and so is a priceless *gem*!" Tracy countered. Taking a moment to let that sink in, she asked, "So, what'd you figure out then... in the park, I mean?"

Josh shrugged again, helplessly. "That I'm not a girl, for starters." he sighed. "Believe me, it would be easier if that's all it was! Everything would make *sense*! I act like a girl, I talk like a girl most of the time, I even *dress* a little like a girl!" he pointed out as he indicated his salmon-colored shirt. "But I'm a *boy*. If I know anything, I know *that* much! I'm just a *weird* boy because my parents are even *weirder*!"

Tracy giggled at the comment, sparking Josh to giggle along with her.

"See? I even *laugh* like a girl!" Looking at his shoes, he shook his head. "But I'm still a boy... and I *like* being a boy!"

"You write like a girl, too." she added. "Those little circles over your 'i's? That's a *girl* thing!" Suddenly thinking of something, Tracy drew in a sharp

breath. "So... if they took away all your boy clothes, how do you still have what you have on?"

"I washed my camp clothes. That's all I *have* now." he answered defeatedly. "Apart from what's filling my closet and dresser, that is."

"So... this weekend... when you were washing your clothes... what did you..." She couldn't make herself ask the rest of the question.

"Don't ask." he glumly replied as the bus ground to a halt. "I don't think I could ever live it down if it got out I was wearing a fuzzy pink bathrobe!"

Tracy stared at him wide-eyed as kids started filing off the bus ahead of them. Waiting their turn, they got up together and slowly made their way up to the front of the bus.

"Don't tell anyone, OK Trace?" he begged as they got off together. "Not even Dave!"

"Davie would understand, Josh!" she offered in counterpoint. "He's the one that made sure all the guys at your camp knew you weren't gay like them, right? For a brother, he's a pretty stand-up guy!"

"Even if he is a fruit!" Josh barbed, knowing he was allowed to joke with Tracy and David that way without offending them. "Seriously though, Trace. *Please?* I... it's just too humiliating! This is worse than the whole gay thing they've been on about for the last seven years! They're talking about *hormone* blockers, Trace! And just when I found my first chest hair last month!"

Tracy giggled as she walked with him. "You studly *man*, you!"

The two giggled together as they made their way into the building, following the sea of twelve and thirteen year-olds. After they were inside, David finally caught up with them.

"Hey, you two!" he shouted. "So what's the juicy? What've you two been whispering about all the way from our stop?"

"Private stuff, Davie." Tracy admonished. "*Very* personal and *very* none of your business, *OK*? Trust me, you *don't* wanna know!"

Looking hurt for a moment, David looked at his sister and his best friend. "Is this about... like, a *girl* problem?"

Turning to Josh, who was wide-eyed in terror at the prospect of his latest parental embarrassment getting out, Tracy nodded. "Um... *yeah*. You could say that. Josh has a *girl* problem."

"*Blech!*" David retched, thinking she meant that Josh had a girl he liked. "Never mind! You're right, I *don't* wanna know!"

Chapter 2 - "Girl" Problems

Their first day started uneventfully. The trio got their locker assignments, their class schedules, and coordinated when they would have time to hang out and share classes. When Josh saw the first class of the day that his parents had signed him up for was Home Economics instead of the Shop class he'd asked for, his heart sank a little more. The only bright point was that he'd be sharing the class with Tracy... and twenty-seven other girls.

For PE, Josh was barred by his parents from participating in any team sports or directly competitive sports like wrestling. Sports weren't that interesting to him, but he still felt excluded by not being allowed to play them. Instead, Josh was allowed to run track. Not many kids actually did anything in PE though since the coaches weren't allowed to fail anyone for lack of physical ability. So, while Josh ran track, the rest of the boys either played basketball or sat and watched the game. Most of the girls just stood around talking or reading, while only a few of the 'sporty' girls ran track with him, making Josh the only boy running with a group of girls. He also would be changing in the coach's office, alone.

The 'girl problem' continued when Josh got to his next class; choir. Small for his age, and still not feeling the vocal effects of puberty, he was placed with the Altos, which of course were eight girls. His vocal range would have easily permitted him to be placed with the boys singing Tenor, but the school, courtesy of Josh's parents, had advised his teacher that 'she' preferred the company of 'other girls'.

Last before lunch was Social Studies. Here at least he was just a student, but by that time the boys were avoiding him like the plague. Since students had no assigned seats on the first day, all the other boys filled the rows on the right and back, while the girls all filled the left and front. Forced through glares and non-verbal intimidation to not sit near any of the boys, he ended up having to take the only seat remaining... right in the middle of the girls. He was almost happy though when he saw Tracy sitting to his left.

As class began, he was mortified to learn that their seats were now going to be their assigned seats for the rest of the year. Dropping his head to his desk, he looked up again when he felt a tapping on his right shoulder.

"Excuse me." the girl whispered. "You have a pen? Mine ran out of ink!"

Looking over at the girl, Josh's heart skipped several beats as he took in the sight beside him. Smiling at him warmly, her dark curls framing her face flawlessly, he swallowed hard and felt his temperature rise quickly. Finally remembering to breathe, he exhaled and tried to keep from hyperventilating. After what seemed to be a year but was in reality only a few seconds of his body forgetting its autonomic functions, he nodded and dug into his black backpack with the rainbow on the back. Pulling out a spare pen, he handed it to her and regained the use of his tongue. "H... here." he whispered.

Flashing a smile, the girl took the pen and mouthed, "*Thanks!*" at him coyly.

Turning back toward the teacher, who seemed to be still getting his notes together, Josh was glad of the reprieve. Looking to his left, he saw Tracy looking at him with her jaw slightly slack and eyes wide open. Slowly, a smile spread across her lips and she turned back to the front of the class just as their teacher began handing out their first worksheets.

When the bell rang several decades later, Josh was slow to leave, stunned by the apparent goddess of beauty who had deigned to acknowledge his presence. Exiting the room, he ran straight into Tracy waiting for him.

"Josh?" she asked in mock concern. "You *in* there? *Helloooo!*"

"*Huh?*" he replied vacantly.

Reaching up, she felt his forehead, then put her fingers on his wrist, and finally looked directly in his eyes as though he were ill. "*Hmm*. Slightly warm and flushed, rapid heart rate, eyes dilated... Yep. You *got* it."

Suddenly shaking himself back to awareness, he really looked at her for the first time since leaving the class. "What? Got *what*?"

Smiling as she sighed and tilted her head, she shook it slowly. "The *hots!* For *Brenda!*"

Blushing heavily, he looked at the floor and clutched his school binder to his chest. "*So?* What difference does that make?"

While the two began to walk toward their lockers to get their lunches, Tracy giggled. "Only all the difference in the *world*, dummy! Don't you see? This is the solution to all your problems! You just need a *girlfriend!*"

"Last I checked, you need a *girl* to have a girlfriend!" he verbally parried her hopeful advice. "Brenda has to be the most beautiful girl in the *school*. What chance does a weirdo like *me* have?" Realizing that he'd accidentally insulted Tracy's looks, he back-peddled hastily. "Not that I don't think you're beautiful, mind you! You *are*, Trace... *gorgeous* even... but, I mean..." Stuck for a way out of his own trap without lying to his best friend, he sighed in resignation. "Sorry."

Almost laughing hysterically at his feeble attempts to flatter her, Tracy finally controlled herself and put a gentle hand on Josh's shoulder. "It's alright, Josh! I *know* what you mean! I know I'm not your type, and that's OK, because you aren't mine, either! Not that there's anything *wrong* with you that is, you're pretty good looking, really... but we've been friends so long you're like my... *brother*, kinda, and I'm like a *sister* to you, so it's no big thing!"

Pausing a moment, she stopped walking and for the first time in years seriously looked at him with a critical eye. He was short, barely four-foot eight inches, with a slim build she would almost call 'willowy', his large brown eyes were nothing special, and his mousy brown hair could use a trim, but his face was nice enough looking with no blemishes or freckles.

"*Actually* Josh, now that I really look at you, you're pretty cute!" she admitted. "I mean, you're no *Orlando Bloom*, but... yeah... if you weren't *you*, I think I'd be crushing on you pretty good about now!"

Looking at her quizzically, Josh stammered for a reply. "Um... well... that's kind of... *weird!*"

"*I know!*" Tracy giggled as they continued heading for their lockers.

Resuming their walk, Josh did likewise with Tracy, really looking at her objectively. He had always known she was pretty. Her round face, framed by her shoulder-length chocolate brown hair, was fair complexioned, with just the right amount of freckles to be adorable. While she was four inches taller than he was, that was the case for *most* of the girls in seventh grade. Her clothes were girly, but stylish, and she walked with an air of confidence that just screamed, 'I'm pretty and I know it!'. He hated to admit it, but he realized that he felt the same way about her as she about him; if she were anyone else, he'd have already asked her out.

Seeing David at his locker, the two quickly closed the distance to him. "So, what's with the slowness? Aren't you two *hungry?*" he quipped at the two friends approaching.

"*Can* it, Davie!" Tracy admonished. "Josh has had a pretty rough day." Leaning in close, she whispered, "His 'girl' problem sits right next to him in fourth period... and she *talked* to him! It's *Brenda!*"

Looking at his friend, David nodded. "Yep... I see it. Glazed eyes, flushed cheeks, inability to speak spontaneously..." He smiled wickedly. "You got it *so* bad! No accounting for taste, though! *Brenda?* Ugh! *Way* too girly!"

"For *you*, maybe!" Tracy jabbed as she took her lunch from her locker. "But then, you think anyone more feminine than *Leonardo DiCaprio* is too girly! Including me... *and* Josh!"

"*Please!*" Josh begged as he closed his locker, lunch in hand. "No references to me being too girly?" Realizing he'd made reference to his 'problem', veiled though it had been, in front of David made him wince with regret. *Oh God! Please don't let him ask what I meant by that!*

"Whadda mean by *that*?" David inevitably asked.

Sighing and looking at Tracy, he shrugged and waved a hand dismissively at her. "Whatever. I can't keep a secret from him, anyway. I *stink* at it! You might as well tell him!"

While the three walked toward the cafeteria, and continuing while they sat down together, Tracy whispered in her brother's ear what Josh's latest trouble with his parents was. Finally catching him up as they began to eat, David started to chuckle.

"What's so funny, wise-ass!" Josh mumbled defensively.

Finally getting his laughter under control, David shook his head ruefully. "Just thinking that about a million T-girls would kill or die to be in your place right now... and you *hate* it!" Finally loosing control, his chuckling resumed at the humor of the situation.

Josh ate glumly while his best friend tried not to laugh at his pitiable situation until Tracy nudged Josh. "Brenda at twelve o'clock!" she whispered, making sure to look the other way as she did. "And she was looking at *you!*"

Josh could feel the heat rising in him as he spotted the girl of his dreams suddenly look away, pretending she hadn't just been looking at him. "I *have* to talk to her!" he said, mostly to himself. "I mean, she must be interested, right? She *smiled* at me... and was just looking at me..."

"Trying to talk yourself into it, big shot?" Tracy joked. "Just get up, walk over to her, and say 'Hi!' It's *easy!* What's the worst she can do?"

"Point and laugh?" he countered. "Scream 'Harassment!' at the top of her lungs? Say nothing and snub me? Pretty much anything other than say, 'I love you, Josh!' is a *disaster* as far as I can see!"

Finally controlling his funny bone, David caught up on the conversation quickly. "Oh, for crying out loud, Josh! Just *talk* to her! She's probably more afraid of you than you are of her!"

"That's *spiders*, not *girls*, Dave." Josh smirked.

"Spiders, girls... toe-*may*-toe, toe-*mah*-toe... *Ouch!*"

Withdrawing her hand from having slapped her brother in the arm, Tracy sighed and turned to her friend. "Josh? Do you trust me?"

"As you command, Miss *Trace*." he answered wryly.

"Stand up." she ordered him, and watched as he slowly obeyed. "Now walk over to her and say hi. When she says hi back, tell her how beautiful you think she looks today. Now, *go!*"

Caught in a near trance-like state, Josh simply followed Tracy's instructions to the letter. Approaching Brenda, he saw her look behind herself, as though searching for the person Josh was really looking at. Finally standing in front of her, he cleared his throat and almost whispered, "*Hi.*"

Brenda blushed and looked at the floor a moment before smiling back up at him shyly. "*Hi.*"

Nervously, Josh forced the words out of his mouth just exactly as Tracy had told him. "I just wanted to tell you how beautiful you think she looks today." His eyes suddenly popping out of his head as the girl giggled along with the two girls she was standing with, he tried to correct his compliment. "I mean, how beautiful *you* look today! *Sorry!*"

Smiling at him and thinking it was adorable how flustered he'd become, she was happy to see him come back to reality. "Thank you... *Josh*, right? Fourth period History?" Seeing him nod, she smirked a little before continuing. "...and first period *Home Ec*?"

Hearing the two girls next to her giggling mercilessly, Josh was overcome with a horrible feeling. Needing to know the truth, he started out with his own. "That was my parents' idea! *Grownups*! They can be so clueless!"

Not expecting that response, her smile melted. "You mean, you didn't take Home Ec just to meet *me*? I thought..."

Closing his eyes as he realized their giggling wasn't in mockery, but in giddiness over a perceived romantic gesture on his part, Josh lowered his gaze in defeat. "I'm sorry. I... I guess that's why you talked to me in History. Because you thought I'd done that for *you*?" Seeing her nod, he sighed in utter humiliation. *The only reason she likes me is because my stupid parents think I'm trans! Beautiful!* Turning to go, he was surprised when he felt a cool hand on his elbow.

"*Wait!*" Brenda said quickly, before drawing her hand back. "I... I guess it doesn't really matter that much *why* you were in Home Ec. I still think you're *nice!*" Looking up at the clock, she sighed and looked back at him. "I... *We* have to go, Josh." Pausing a moment, she pulled a pen out of the back pocket of her jeans and took Josh's hand. Writing carefully but clearly, she jotted seven numbers into his palm in her flowery script. "*Call me?*" she asked sweetly as she traced her fingertips over his, pulling slowly back away from him.

Stunned, Josh nodded and smiled while blushing more than she was. "Um... OK. *When?*"

Starting to move away with her two friends flanking her, she continued to stare into his eyes. "After school? Four o'clock."

Still grinning like an idiot, Josh watched her backing away from him. "OK! Talk to you later, *Brenda!*"

The three girls leaned in close to one another and giggled like mad as they walked toward the exit of the cafeteria. Looking down at his hand, Josh read the number quickly, just before he saw a half-eaten slice of greasy pizza being smashed into his open palm.

"*Oh!* So sorry, fruitcake!" Reggie faux-apologized. "My bad! *Here*, let me clean that up for you!"

Watching in horror, Josh saw as Reggie roughly slid the pile of cheese and sauce off his hand and quickly smashed a clean napkin in its place, rubbing hard enough to smear the numbers into oblivion.

"*There!* All clean!" he mocked. "Too bad about her phone number though, *fag!* Win some, lose some! Heh, heh, heh!"

Narrowing his eyes and putting his hands on his hips, Josh smirked. "You know Reggie, you're a *jerk!* A first-class *Neanderthal!* You keep calling me gay, but you know what I *really* am?"

"What's *that*, Pansy-boy?"

"A guy smart enough to read the number right away!" he gloated.

Sneering cruelly, Reggie stepped closer to Josh. "Guess I'll just have to pound it out of you then, *Limp-wrist!*"

"Is there a problem here, Mr. Hughes?" a man's voice boomed from behind the bully.

His sneer melting into a phony smile, Reggie turned to the imposing man. "*Hi*, Mr. T! No! No problem! *Right*, Josh?" Working to weasel his way out

of the predicament, he tried to put his arm around Josh to look friendly while still being intimidating.

Ducking under Reggie's attempt at veiled coercion, Josh stepped further away from the boy. "As a matter of fact Mr. Tanner, Reggie here was just threatening to *pound* me for outsmarting him in his attempts to *bully* me!"

Moving quickly, Tracy came up to vouch for Josh's account of events. "It's *true*, Mr. Tanner! We *all* heard him!"

Smiling down at the now far-outnumbered boy, the school's Vice-Principal crooked a finger at him. "I know... I was standing right behind him when he said it. Come along, Reginald. You just earned yourself a three-day suspension for bullying a protected minority!"

Hearing himself called 'a protected minority' caused Josh to visibly wince. *Great! The dull duo already got to the Vice-Principal and he's acting as my White Knight! That'll make me real popular!* Wanting to stop Mr. Tanner and correct his perceptions, the only reason he didn't was that he'd have to explain the situation, that his parents were insane, in front of half the school. Just thankful of the save for the moment, he suddenly remembered he needed to write Brenda's phone number down before he forgot it.

Quickly running for his table, he remembered he left his pack, with all his pens, in his locker at the start of lunch. Turning to Tracy as the lunchroom started to empty out he asked, "*Quick!* Got a pen, Trace?"

Thinking fast, all she had was her purse with a few cosmetics. Reaching in, she grabbed a pink lipstick and handed it to her best friend. "*Here!* Use this!"

Taking the lip color, he grabbed a napkin and quickly scrawled the number down as best as he could remember it. "It'll do." he sighed as he handed the lipstick back to Tracy. "Worst case I'll just try a few variations and get a hold of her *that* way!" he sighed. "I'm pretty sure it's right, though!"

Hearing the bell to end lunch, the three headed back to their lockers together. On the way, Josh noticed a skinny boy with glasses looking at him with fire in his eyes. Not sure why he'd raised the ire of a member of the geek-squad, he shrugged it off and continued on his way to his locker.

"*Jeeze*, Josh!" David said as he took his pack out. "You weren't kidding! Protected minority? Are they *serious*? Since when are straight white males a minority?"

"When their parents tell the school that you're trans-questioning, *that's* when!" Tracy said in hushed tones. "It's part of the district policy now. They *have* to treat Josh like he's a minority!"

Slamming his locker shut, David moved in close to Josh. "I don't think I care for that situation!" he grumbled low. "That's supposed to be for people that *need* protection!"

"You think I like it any *better*, Dave?" he grumbled back. "I'll be lucky if this doesn't get around the whole *school* by the end of the day, now! The whole freaking school is gonna think I'm gay or trans!"

"And what's so terrible about *that*?" his friend argued louder.

Lowering his tone, he moved in closer to David. "Nothing, and you *know* I believe that! What if *Brenda* gets wind of it, though? There go my chances of a date! Same with pretty much every girl in school, not counting Trace!"

"*Eww!*" Tracy huzzed. "Don't be gross, Josh!"

"You know what I..." he shouted in a whisper, stopping when his temper flared. "You know what? *Fine!* You two wanna be that way? *Abandon* me? Kick me when I'm facing certain doom? Go ahead! Be just like everyone else! What do *I* care anymore! My life is effectively over, anyway! Daddy and Mom are gonna make me be a girl no matter what, so what difference

does *you* two being total jerks to me make anyway!" Slamming his locker closed, Josh stormed off to his fifth period Math class alone.

His last two periods, English and Computers, seemed to make him even more certain that his rep was effectively ruined at this school, and High School after that unless his parents decided to move; an event he considered only slightly more likely than the Earth being struck by a comet. At that point, he was rooting for the comet. He could almost understand the words being whispered from student to student as he went through the typing exercises, but not quite enough to make out any details.

When at last the bell rang at two-thirty to end school, Josh made his way solemnly to his locker. There, waiting for him, was the same nerdy looking kid who had given him the evil eye at lunch. Walking up to him since he was blocking Josh's locker, he stopped and put a hand on one hip. "Did I like, crap in your *Corn Flakes* or something?" he asked snidely. "Just what's *your* issue with me? Not enough pocket protector in my wardrobe?"

Jason Dexter sneered at the boy in front of him. "Go ahead! *Flaunt* it! I *hate* you people! Reggie gives me a swirly this morning and what happens? *Nothing!* He gets a warning! He so much as *threatens* to touch you, and there's Mr. Tanner... carting him away! Protected minority? *Ha!* More like privileged *few*, if you ask me! Just you watch it, buster! You so much as *look* at me the wrong way, and I'll see to it your entire digital world becomes a nightmare! *Fag!*" At that Jason stormed off to go home.

Now the lowest of the low, the target of muscle-headed bullies, his own friends, and even the computer geeks, Josh couldn't take any more and ran to the nearest bathroom. Running into a stall, he sat on the edge of the toilet and began to sob. He didn't know how long he sat there, but eventually a janitor came in, forcing him to stop crying and dry his eyes on toilet paper.

"Somebody in there?" the older man grumbled. "School's closed! You kids are supposed to be gone by now! Get out!"

Unlocking the stall, he inched his way around the angry gray-haired man and ran out the door. Exiting the building, he saw all the busses were gone, and he was five miles from home. With no other option, he pulled out his cell phone and called his mother.

"This is Melanie, go ahead?" she answered.

"Mom?" Josh cried. "I... I missed the bus and I need a ride home!"

"Oh, *angel!*" she moaned. "You sound like you had a *really* bad day! Did someone harass you? We made sure the school knew about your situation when we enrolled you! Are you OK, sweetheart?"

Hearing her talking to him like he was a five-year-old girl nearly sent him over the edge again, but he still needed a ride home. Taking a slow breath, he calmed himself before continuing. "Can you come pick me up, Mom?"

"I'm sorry, sweetie! I'm stuck at work! Let me call your father and see if he can pick you up. OK? Hold the line, please." she stated out of habit.

Hearing his mother put him on hold while he stood around waiting, Josh sighed and tried to hold his emotions in check. A few minutes later, the hold music went away and he heard his mother's happy voice.

"Good news, princess! *Daddy's* on his way to rescue you!"

Almost retching at how disgustingly girly his mother was treating him, Josh swallowed his pride and nodded absently before answering. "Thanks, Mom. I appreciate it."

"Mommy has to go, sweetie. *Love* you!" she said right before hanging up.

Almost twenty minutes later, Fred came chugging down the street in the VW minibus. Glad that at least none of his schoolmates were around to see

him, Josh jumped in the passenger seat as soon as the vehicle squealed to a stop.

"Thanks for coming, Daddy." he sighed as he buckled in. "Can we go?"

"First, I want to know what happened." Fred insisted as he put the parking brake on. "Why did you miss the bus?" Looking more closely at Josh, his eyes widened. "Have you been *crying*?"

Defensive, Josh furrowed his brow and sat up straight. "Of *course* not, Daddy! Boys don't cry!"

"You *have* been crying, sweetheart!" he said as he turned the motor off. "Tell Daddy what happened."

Sighing in frustration, Josh reasoned he wasn't going anywhere until his father was satisfied that he was alright. "It was *nothing*, Daddy!" he insisted. "Stupid Reggie Hughes tried to bully me and he got suspended. That and I had a *little* argument with Trace and Dave. I missed the bus 'cuz I had to go to the bathroom after the last bell and I took too long. See? It's *nothing*!"

Removing his seatbelt, Fred reached for the door handle. "Come on, pump... I mean... sweetheart! We're going into the office! I want a word with your Vice-Principal! He was *supposed* to ease your transition so you could feel free to proceed at your own pace! Now I find out you got harassed on your first *day*? This cannot be allowed!"

"Daddy, *please*!" he begged. "Mr. Tanner suspended Reggie for three days for just *threatening* me! Isn't that enough? Everyone knows it, too. He got caught doing it right in the middle of the lunchroom... the *idiot*..."

"*Josh*!" Fred admonished him. "We do *not* use epithets that are insulting to people with cognitive disabilities!"

Cowed, Josh continued. "Anyway, he did it in front of *everybody*, and Mr. Tanner told everybody there that Reggie was suspended for three days for his threat... and... um... why the punishment was so harsh."

Fred's eyes went wide. "He *outed* you? In front of the whole school?"

Burying his head in his hands as he continued to dig the hole deeper and deeper, Josh shook his head slowly. "*No!* I mean... not *really*. All he said was that it was for threats against a protected minority is all! Just let it go! *Please Daddy!* Just take me home!" Looking at his watch, he could see it was already a quarter after three and he was supposed to be calling Brenda in less than forty-five minutes and it took at least fifteen to get home.

"Sweetheart, I need you to listen to me, OK?" Fred stated calmly. "It's important that you not run from reporting a hate crime just because it's embarrassing! How many women are *raped* each year that don't report it because they're embarrassed? I need to know that you're going to be a *strong* woman who won't let men dominate you or make you fear them! I'm supposed to be your role model for what a *good* man is, and a good man doesn't let his daughter suffer a hate crime without seeing to it that the perpetrator is punished! Do you understand?"

Suddenly inspired, just moments from crying again, Josh looked over at his father. "Daddy, it can't be classed as a *hate* crime! Sure, the school has *their* standards for who falls under their rules of being a protected minority, but the *law* doesn't see it that way unless Reggie *knew* I was dysphoric! He couldn't have because no one knew until *after* Mr. Tanner suspended him!" He'd learned all about gender dysphoria and the law in his summer camp during one of the LGBT workshops he'd been signed up for by his parents. As soon as he finished speaking though, he realized what he'd said. *Oh my God! I all but just admitted I'm trans to Daddy! Now I'm totally screwed!*

Thinking for a moment, then fully processing what his 'daughter' had just admitted, at least to his ears, he smiled at Josh and pulled the door closed.

"I'm proud of you, sweetheart!" he said with a tear in his eye. "You really *are* a wonderful daughter!" Reaching over, he planted a kiss on his forehead and buckled himself in. "Alright. You're being grown-up about this, so I'll trust it to your judgement. I'll take you home."

Josh was never so thankful to hear the chugging of the old Microbus's four cylinders as they began pushing the vehicle down the street.

Chapter 3 - A Girl's Reputation

When Josh walked in the door, he headed straight for his room. Repressing an involuntary shudder at the ultra-feminine dwelling, he picked up his phone extension, only to hear the squeal of a modem. Suddenly realizing his father was still at 'work', running his computer consultant business from home on the house's second telephone line that was also his bedroom phone line, he lowered the receiver quickly. Hoping he hadn't kicked his father off-line, he thought quickly and went back down to his father's office.

He knew if he used his cell phone for anything other than an emergency, like earlier that day, his parents would know within a few days and he'd be in serious trouble. Their cell phones had less than five hundred minutes per month so as to not be too ostentatious, so they had to watch their usage carefully. Most months Fred would use up almost all of them doing his job, and buying extra minutes was considered a luxury they wouldn't tolerate.

"Daddy?" he asked in his sweetest impression of a girl's voice. "Can I use the main house phone to call a friend I met at school today? Her name's Brenda and I told her I'd call her at four." He choked the words out of his mouth in hopes that once he and Brenda were an item, his parents would finally give up their insistence that he was a girl; and more importantly, that he liked guys. "I won't be *long!*"

Holding up a finger to Josh, Fred finished making changes to the HTML code and saved it before turning to him. "Say again, pum... sweetheart?"

"I met a nice girl at school today, Daddy. Her name's Brenda and I told her I'd call her around four. It's almost four *now!* May I *please* use the main house phone?" he almost begged. "I won't be on it long! I *promise!*" Playing on his parents' insistence that he was a girl, Josh did his best imitation of Tracy in the times when he'd seen her beg her father for something she wanted.

"Oh!" Fred smiled. "I *heard* about this! 'Little girl eyes' and their effect on Daddies! You know what? They're *right*! Come here, princess!"

Josh walked over to his father, still with pleading eyes and was shocked when his father pulled him up on his knee.

"Give me a big hug and a big kiss and the answer is *yes*!" he bargained.

Not having counted on that, Josh almost threw in the towel, but he was desperate. *I have to talk to Brenda and make sure she doesn't believe the rumors going around school!* he sighed inwardly. Steeling himself and smiling sweetly, he wrapped his arms around his father and hugged him, then forced himself to pucker up and give him a kiss on the cheek. Almost gagging over the ordeal, he tried to just remember when he was little and still did such things. Pulling back, he asked impatiently, "*Now* can I go call her?"

Laughing at his faux-girlish behavior, Fred shook his head. "Alright, sweetie! I know girls need to be able to talk on the phone a lot, so you don't have to ask to use the house phone when I'm at work anymore. OK, princess? Go call your new friend!"

Smiling with relief, Josh hopped off his father's lap, being sure to keep up the act until he left the room. "*Thanks, Daddy! You're the best!*" Running from the office, Josh bee-lined for the extension in the living room next to the couch. Picking it up and hearing the dial tone, he quickly punched in the number he'd written down in pink lipstick. Hearing the phone ring several times, a girl's voice answered.

"*Hello?*"

"Brenda? This is Josh! Sorry I'm a few minutes late in calling you. I had trouble getting home."

Silence filled the void between the two phones that seemed to stretch on into eternity. "Um... *sorry*. Wrong number."

Hearing the phone disconnect, Josh felt the lump rising in his throat. *That was most definitely Brenda!* he told himself. Gulping as he put the handset back down on the cradle, he was about to get up when he decided to try and mend a few fences. Picking up the phone, he quickly dialed the Edwards' residence. Hearing the line ring twice, he was happy to hear Tracy answer.

"*Hello?*"

"*Trace!* I'm *so* sorry for today! *Please* forgive me! I... I struck out with Brenda. She pretended it was the wrong number and hung up on me." The terrible silence again threatened to kill his last hope of having an ally against his parents. "*Please*, Trace? I'll do anything you say... if only you'll forgive me! I... I need you to be my friend. *Please?*"

Hearing a sigh over the line, Josh was finally relieved when she spoke. "*Alright*, I forgive you, you little pain! But don't you *ever* bark at me like that again! You *hear* me?"

"*Honest* Trace, I swear I'll *never* do anything like that again! You have my word of honor!"

"*Good!* Now about my favor..."

"*What* favor?" Josh asked confusedly.

"You said if I forgave you, you'd do anything I say, right?"

"Oh." Josh mused aloud. "I thought the *promise* was the favor."

"No, that was just my guarantee. You've never broken a promise with me Josh, and I don't think you ever will, so I knew the favor was good."

"Oh." he stated simply. "So what do you want?"

"First, I want to come over to your place."

"Well, *that's* a tiny favor. You do that all the time anyway! You know you're welcome here!"

"That's not the favor *either*. I'll let you know when it is, OK?"

Perplexed slightly, he shrugged absently and agreed. "OK. When you coming over? Dave *too*?"

"No, just me. I'll be there in about twenty minutes. I need to finish my stupid homework first." Tracy stated exasperatedly.

"Alright. I'll probably still be working on mine when you get here, OK?"

"Bye!"

"Bye, Trace!"

Recovered slightly from his heart-crushing loss of Brenda, Josh sighed and got up, hurrying to get his homework done before Tracy came over. Not even giving it much thought, he just poured himself into his assignments with dedication while sitting at the dining room table. He had a desk in his room, at least it looked like a desk to him, only this one had a mirror on the back for some reason he couldn't fathom. The less time he spent in there the better, though. *It's bad enough that I have to sleep there under that girly canopy and on Strawberry Shortcake sheets!* Blowing his hair up and out of the way, he reminded himself that he still needed to get a haircut.

Twenty minutes later, Tracy walked in the front door unannounced, as usual. "Hey, Josh. Almost done?"

Holding up a finger as he finished writing, just as his father did, Josh finally sighed as he placed the page in his binder for the next day. "*Done!* Sorry, Trace! I was late getting home. Daddy had to come get me."

Sitting in the chair next to him, Tracy nodded. "I could kinda see that you weren't on the bus. What *happened?*"

Josh told Tracy a brief version of Jason's confrontation and threat while he made them snacks out of rice cakes, peanut butter, and honey. "Honestly, it's not like I *asked* for any of this to happen! If I could see a way out of it, I'd take it in a *heartbeat!* Right now the only way out I see is turning eighteen and running for the hills!"

"But who will you be when you run?" Tracy asked before taking a bite.

Confused at first, Josh eventually caught on. "Oh, you mean my parents with their polar opposite idea of who I am? Best plan I have right now is stalling until I get a girlfriend." Remembering the events of the day, he sighed. "Of course, after today, I may still be trying to find a willing sucker when I move out! By now the whole *school* must think I'm gay... and even if I say I'm not they won't believe me because Mr. Tanner as much as said so in front of *everyone!*"

Wincing slightly, Tracy didn't want to share what she had learned after their fight, but figured Josh needed to know. "Um... They don't think you're *gay.*"

Looking up, Josh sighed in relief. "Really? Whew! *That's* a load off my mind! Makes me wonder why Brenda gave me the cold shoulder, though."

Gulping, Tracy knew she had to just rip the bandage off quickly. "They think you're *trans.*"

Josh stopped eating with a bite inches from his mouth. Stunned, he dropped the rice cake absently back onto the plate. "They... *what? How!?*"

Feeling guilty about having been at least cursorily responsible for getting Josh outed, Tracy put her food down too. "Um, remember when we were fighting at the lockers? Remember what you said?"

Thinking back, he tried to recall the exact words, but couldn't. "Not *exactly* no, but it was something like you two abandoning me and kicking me when I'm down or some stupid junk."

"You said, 'Mom and Dad are going to make me become a girl.'. None of us were paying attention to who was around or how loud we'd gotten."

Realizing what that meant, and how most of the school had seen him flirting with Brenda, he sat back in his chair wide-eyed. "They all think I'm a butch, lesbian, T-girl!"

"Pretty much, yeah." Tracy sighed. "I sure wish we could have a do-over for today! This is *bad!*"

"You don't know the *half* of it yet." Josh stated flatly. "There's a *bonus* prize." Seeing Tracy on the edge of her seat, Josh just let it rip. "I was so desperate to get a hold of Brenda this afternoon, and Daddy was going to take *forever* chewing out everyone at the school for 'endangering his little girl', so I... I sort of... *on accident... might* have gave him the *vaguest* impression that I was admitting I'm trans?"

Tracy's eyes shot open at the revelation. "And knowing *him...*"

"...he took it and ran with it like Carl Lewis, yeah." Josh finished for her. "So, now he thinks I'm 'Daddy's little girl' and he's started calling me *princess*. Mom, too. I'm *so* screwed!"

Suddenly perking up, Tracy got a smile on her face. "Wait a minute! No you're not! You still have to be... um... what's-it... where they have a shrink sign off on you, right? Isn't that part of the whole process?"

Looking like a man who'd gotten a pardon just as they were strapping him into the chair, Josh smiled. "Of *course!* I just have to blow the interview! Once a professional tells them I'm not trans, they'll *have* to believe it, tell the school, and then I can work my way out of all this! *Yeah!*"

Tracy looked up at him curiously. "So... you're *sure* you want out of it?"

Looking over at his once-more best friend, he was so elated by the news that it took him a moment to process her question. "Huh? *Oh!* Of course! I'm no girl! I *like* being a boy! No offense, but for me, being a boy is what it's all about! It's who I am as sure as I'm sitting here!"

Thinking a moment, Tracy stood up. "Can I see your room?"

"*That* train wreck?" he asked. "Why? It's *horrid!*"

"I just wanna see it for myself, is all. Is that OK?"

Shrugging, he picked up his rice cake again. "OK. It's your funeral! Don't say I didn't *warn* you, though! It's pretty over-the-top!"

"Come *with?*"

Stopping short of a bite, he put it down. "Why? I've *seen* it! *Blech!*"

"*Please,* Josh? I wouldn't feel right poking around your room without you there! It's just not... *right.*"

Rolling his eyes, he got up and headed for the kitchen. "Let me wash my hands and clean up first!" he said defeatedly.

After putting away their snacks, Josh followed Tracy up the stairs. Once at the top she turned right and went into Josh's room, coming to a complete halt only a few feet in, stunned at the sight.

"See what I mean?" Josh huffed and crossed his arms as he leaned on the doorframe. "It's like a five-year-old girl had a dream about her perfect room and it escaped into *my* room!"

Looking around, she took in the entire feel of the place. "Actually, it's not *that* different from your old room, other than the carpet and paint color. That and the furniture is better."

"Better is a matter of opinion!" he snarked. "Open a drawer on the dresser!"

Walking over to the pristine piece of functional art, she slowly slid one of the drawers open; the runners so smooth they made almost no sound. Looking inside, she saw a huge assortment of girl's underwear, all perfectly organized and sorted by color, style, and material. "*Josh!*" she said breathlessly. "Did *you* sort this?"

"*No!*" he insisted. "I only opened the drawers once when I first got home from camp. Mom must have done it."

"I ask because... well... I've known you a long time... since we were four at least... and I've looked in your drawers before. You *always* kept them just like this... sorted and everything neatly folded just so."

Walking over to the dresser for only the second time, Josh actually took a good look at the contents this time, more than the momentary glance he'd given it previously. "Oh. I... I guess you're right, Trace. Mom must've copied my organization method and just duplicated it with girl things."

Closing the drawer and moving down to the next one, she found an array of bras to fit any style outfit, each one with slight padding to give the wearer at least an A cup; even if they were completely flat chested. "*Damn, girl!*" Tracy exclaimed. "I am starting to get envious! These are all super nice! Not Wally World brand like *I* have!"

"When I get out of this mess, you can have the whole shebang, Trace!" he offered. "No purchase necessary! You do *not* need to be present to win, all sales final, remove tag before using, void where prohibited!"

Not even listening, she moved down to the next drawer full of nightgowns and slips, the next full of tights and socks, and the lowest one full of winter sweaters. "Wow! I can't believe it! You weren't *kidding*! They really *did* go all-out!"

"They're *nuts*!" he explained simply. "You haven't even seen the *worst* part. Go open the closet! I *dare* you!"

Making her way over across the room, she slid the sliding mirror door over and almost lost her breath. "Josh! These... these are all designer labels! I know! I've seen some of them in the mall!" Moving the doors to the other side and hiding the wide array of blouses, skirts, and slacks, she once more lost her breath at the sight of all the designer dresses. Underneath them, on racks laid out by pairs, were an assortment of shoes to fit any occasion or style a twelve-year-old girl might need, from pink trainers to black patent leather heels.

"I'm thinking my mom really wanted a girl all along." Josh admitted. "My clothes were cheap stuff. You *sure* this is all like, expensive?"

Nodding absently as she perused the collection, Tracy looked over her shoulder at Josh. "Would you mind if I..."

"Knock yourself out, girl!" he offered, waving his hands toward the closet. "Have a *ball*!"

Carefully removing one of the designer dresses off the wooden rod, she held it up before laying it against herself. Enjoying the moment, she frowned after a bit as she pressed it up to her body. Digging in to look at the tag, she sighed and reluctantly hung the dress back up and checked several other tags. "Well

that explains it!" she griped, moving to sit on the bed with Josh. "They're all size Medium! I outgrew Mediums two *years* ago! *Damn*, you're skinny! I *hate* you, you *cow*!"

Puzzled at Tracy's verbal assault that seemed to be completely sarcastic, Josh shook his head. "Why would you hate me? *I* didn't buy 'em! *Mom* did! It's not like I *enjoy* being one of the smallest boys in school!"

Looking at the dresses, Tracy bit her lower lip and turned to look him up and down, as if sizing him up. Getting up, she quickly walked over to the bedroom door and closed it. "Josh? Do you trust me?"

"Last time you asked me *that* question, my secret got blown all over the school!"

"I know! But you *know* that wasn't my fault, right?"

"Of *course*, Trace! It just sorta... *happened*! Nobody's fault... well, nobody that is except Reggie... well him and Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dum who I laughingly call my *parents*!"

Walking over to the bed, Tracy took Josh by the hands and helped him stand. Guiding him over near the closet before letting go quite calmly and carefully, she pulled the dress out that she'd first admired and held it up, looking at it once more. It was an all satin navy blue A-line with a white satin tie at the waist, rounded collar, one quarter sleeves, and she desperately wanted to try it on. Short of that, she'd settle for seeing it tried on.

Turning slowly, she lowered the dress down until the shoulders of the dress were even with Josh's shoulders. Taking a step closer to him to actually put it in front of him to check the size, she watched as he took a huge step back in a near panic.

"Don't you even come *near* me with that, Trace! Not even as a *joke*!"

"I just wanted to see how it would fit on someone it's sized for! I would *kill* for a dress like this!"

"Well, find another human sacrifice! I think you're *swell*, Trace! Top notch! Cream of the crop! Top of the heap! But there is *no way*, no way on *Earth*, you're *ever* getting me in a dress! Sorry! Not *ever*!"

"*Never*?" she asked hopefully as she poured on the sweetness.

"Nope!"

"Not even just *once*?"

"Not even just *pretend*!" he insisted. "Trace, those damn things are like an icon of the living *hell* I've descended into! *No*!"

"*Pretty please*?" she asked, doing her best 'adorable little girl' face.

"Go downstairs and try that on Daddy! *He's* the sucker for a pretty pair of eyes! I'm immune until I become a father, myself! Not a *chance*!"

Smiling wickedly, Tracy leveled her secret weapon. "You owe me a favor! You *promised*!"

Having completely forgotten about it, he gulped. "You... you *wouldn't*!"

"I forgave you for treating me like *dirt* for only saying the exact same thing we'd been joking with each other about just a few hours earlier!"

Defeated, Josh slumped back to sit on the girly bed once more. "Yeah, I owe you. But *please*? Not *this*? Trace, I'm *begging* you! *Anything* else! My *kidney*! My left *arm*! My *eyes*! My first born! *Anything*!"

Looking at him, Tracy looked hurt. "I... I never thought I'd see the day..."

"See... see *what* day, Trace?"

Sighing, it was her turn to look defeated. "The day you break a promise."

Josh was crestfallen. *She's right... you said anything and now you're trying to put conditions on it.* Looking up at his best friend, he nodded as a tear rolled down his cheek. "Alright... you win. I said *anything*, and I *promised*. I won't go back on that. I'll do it, but only for you, and then we're *even*." Sighing inwardly, he felt a pang. *And then I don't think we'll be friends anymore.*

Standing up, he strode over to the closet, took the dress from her hand, and let out a breath. "OK, how do I put it on?"

"If you're gonna do this, I want to see the whole thing. Undergarments, shoes, nylons, the whole deal!"

"This is what you had in mind the whole time. *Wasn't* it, Tracy? When you made me make that bargain? Then you came right over?"

She noticed his change in tone and the formality with which he used her name. Looking at her shoes, she fidgeted and nodded. "Yeah. Just forget the whole thing. I tricked you into that promise. I don't wanna do this *that* way. It... it would just be... *wrong*. *All* wrong. This isn't *anything* like I thought it would be."

"How'd you *think* it would be, Tracy?" he snapped back at her.

"I don't know!" she whined as she walked toward the vanity. Opening and closing drawers at random, she didn't even look in them; staring out into space. "I... I thought that maybe... on some level... you *wanted* this! That all it would take to get past your dumb male bravado would be for someone to give you an excuse, so you could justify it to yourself! I... I guess I was just *hoping*..." Tracy sighed and looked down at the beautiful piece of furniture.

"I've ruined *everything*. I've ruined our *friendship*, and all because of a silly idea that you... you..." Tears rolled down her cheeks as she tried to make herself say the words out loud.

"That I'd be *what*, Tracy?" Josh shouted. He already knew what she was going to say, he just wanted her to say it out loud. "Go ahead! *Say* it, Tracy! Say what's *really* on your mind! What *am* I, Tracy!?"

"The sister I never *had*!" she bawled as she forced the words out. Taking a tissue from the box on the vanity, she dried her eyes and let out a ragged breath slowly. Calming herself, she turned to look at Josh who stood exactly where she'd left him; still holding the dress. "I... I have a confession to make, Josh. I... I've *always* thought of you as more like my sister than a brother. You... you're just... too *nice*! You see how Davie and I are! He can be pretty *mean* sometimes! I know, I'm no saint, but... you *care* about my feelings like I do *yours*! *You* hurt when *I* hurt! You're *always* trying to make me happy or feel welcome! I... when I *look* at you... I don't see a *guy*. I see my *sister*."

Josh was stricken. *This is the worst day of my entire life!* he thought. Still holding the dress and not having moved an inch, he looked at his best friend, understood what she was saying, and took a breath. "You're just like *them*. You only want me to be what *you* want me to be, even if I don't feel that way. I want you to leave, Tracy. I don't think we can be friends anymore. I guess we never really *were* friends. *Your* friend was a girl that doesn't *exist*. For my part, I always liked you just for being *you*. I... I wish you could have done the same. Goodbye, Tracy."

Hearing the words felt like a sledgehammer to her heart. Unable to contain herself, full of regret and self-loathing for what she tried to do to her friend, Tracy ran from the room as fast as she could. Tears were streaming down her cheeks as she escaped down the stairs, through the living room, out the front door, and past Melanie on the porch just as she was arriving home.

Josh hung the dress back up in the closet and closed the door. Devastated beyond consoling, he walked over to his bed, lay down, and began to sob uncontrollably. Tears soaked his face, pillow, coverlet, and sheets as his mother entered his room; trying desperately to find out why both friends were so completely distraught. Unable to stop Josh's tears, no matter what she did or said, she eventually decided that her 'daughter' simply needed to cry it all out and then explain later.

She was only wrong on a single point; it was her son who was crying, not her daughter.

Chapter 4 - A New Look

Josh came down the next morning, showered, clean, ready for school, and completely empty of feelings. He'd cried himself to sleep, awoke late in the night, cried himself back to sleep, and finally woke up again shortly before his alarm was set to go off. Emotionally drained, he knew that his parents would be full of questions for which he had no answers.

"Good morning, sweetheart!" Melanie sang hopefully, but her smile died when she saw Josh's reaction, or in his case, the lack thereof.

"Good morning, Mom." he stated flatly as he sat at the table. His breakfast was already served, which was odd for a school day as he usually had to serve himself.

Sitting in the chair next to her son, she ran her fingers through his hair. "I think this weekend I'll take you down to the salon. How does that sound?"

Stopping in the middle of taking a bite, he glared at his mother. *It sounds perfectly awful mother! I'd rather see Dad's barber like normal! Maybe get a buzz-cut?* Knowing he was trapped in a net he helped sew himself into, he simply shrugged his shoulders emptily.

"I guess you just aren't feeling very nice today." she commented. "I see you're still wearing your camp clothes. You don't *have* to, sweetie! You could go up and change into any outfit you like!" Suddenly very conscious that she'd tried to push for Josh's first time out too soon, she backtracked and tried to undo any potential damage. "Or *not*! What you're wearing is *fine*, dear! Girls can wear anything we like! Even scruffy *boy's* clothes!" Seeing she wasn't getting any response at all, she tried a different topic.

"Are you ready to tell us what happened last night, sweetheart?" she probed gently. "I... I hate to insist, but we're *very* worried. She's your best friend! A girl *needs* her BFF! What upset the two of you so much?"

Thinking about what it was that had ended their lifelong friendship, Josh suddenly realized that the truth was the best answer, just told from a certain point of view. "She... she never liked the real me. She only liked what she *thought* I was. We aren't friends anymore."

Pulling Josh out of his chair, Melanie hugged him desperately. To his own surprise, he hugged her in return and, for a moment, felt like everything was going to be all right again. Then Melanie opened her mouth.

"Oh, *sweetheart!* I... I knew there was a risk that if you tried to be yourself your friends might turn on you! I've heard and read so many stories about it! I... I just never thought *Tracy*, of all people, would be like that! After all, you and *Davie*..." Feeling Josh's arms stop hugging her, Melanie leaned back to look at him. "What's wrong, dear? Is... Oh, *no!* Don't tell me! Did... did you and Davie have a falling out? Because you're..."

"We got in an argument." Josh explained in a sorrowful monotone as he sat back down. "He doesn't like me being treated different. He thinks it would have been better if you two had never told the teachers about me and I stayed like I was. Now all the kids at school know. I told him that it wasn't *my* fault, but he blames me anyway. I don't think we're friends anymore. I don't *have* any friends."

"Your father told me you made a new friend yesterday! *Brenda?* You called her up?"

"She pretended it was a wrong number and hung up." Josh said around a bite of cereal. "We made friends before everyone in school heard... when they heard the story that I'm really a girl. Brenda must have found out and now *she's* not my friend, either."

"*Alright!* So those people never really *were* your friends! You don't *need* close-minded people like that in your life! You'll make *new* friends! Friends who'll accept you for who you *are*, and not for what they *expect* you to be!"

Josh looked over at his mother and just rolled his eyes. *You mean exactly what you're doing right now, mother? Hypocrite!* Taking his last bite, he tried not to look too judgmental.

"Oh, I *know*, sweet pea! It doesn't seem like that now, but after a while it'll get better! Your father and I will see to *that!*"

Standing, Josh picked up his black rainbow pack, slung it over his back, and started to the door. "I'll see you after work, Mom. Gotta catch the bus."

"Oh *no* you don't, missy!" Melanie stated as she gently grabbed Josh by the elbow. "I'll not have you riding the bus with the same two so-called friends that *deserted* you just when you needed them most! *I'll* drive you to school, and your father will pick you up after! I think for a *while* you'd be better off where we can keep an eye on you... so you don't have to worry about getting bullied by those superstitious, patriarchal, *transphobes!*"

Sitting Josh down at the table, she knelt down beside him. "Sweetheart, you have to understand that there are a lot of very mean people in this world. People who would hurt you just for being *yourself*. It's not fair, but it's getting better all the time! Maybe even by the time you graduate things will be a *lot* better!"

Josh was too numb to care either way. In the space of a day, his entire world had flipped upside down. Tracy and David weren't his friends anymore, Brenda was dodging him, and his parents were going to be hovering over him night and day, pushing him to be something he wasn't. Life had been weird before, but now it was actually and truly a living hell.

Driving the car the five miles to school, Melanie tried to draw 'her daughter' out. She pointed at shops to see if Josh would like to go in and try things on and talked about all the things she needed to teach him that every twelve-year-old girl would have been taught years earlier. Finally, when stopped at a light, his mother pressed a point.

"Sweetie, I know we need to be patient with you, especially now that you've been hurt so badly, but are you ready to tell us your *real* name?"

"My name is Joshua Vincent Ryan."

Sighing, she shook her head. "You don't need to *hide* anymore, sweetie! That was the name your father and I gave you when you were born because we thought... well... to our shame we *assumed* we had a boy. I don't know if you can ever forgive us for not seeing the real you sooner, sweetheart!" Pausing a moment as they started moving again, Melanie struck on an idea. "*I* know! I understand now, baby! We never told you what your name *should* have been if we'd have known you were really a girl! You just accepted the name we gave you unconditionally! I need to pull over!"

Pulling into a strip mall parking lot, Melanie grabbed a tissue and dabbed at her eyes, trying not to ruin her makeup. Once settled, she turned and looked at Josh. "I'm *so* sorry! We should have named you Jocelyn! *That* was the name your father and I picked out for you before we *assumed* you were a boy! Jocelyn Viola Ryan! *Yes!* How do you like that, sweetie?"

"My name is Joshua Vincent Ryan. I don't *have* any other name. That's what's on my birth certificate, so that's who I *am*." he said emotionlessly.

"Oh, sweetie! Your father and I will fix *that!* You must be in *so* much pain! That's enough! You *cannot* go to school today! Not after the *nightmare* you went through yesterday! You need time to *heal*... to stop *hating* this part of your life that, right now, seems to have only brought you misery, just for trying to shine out as yourself! I'm *such* a fool! I'm doing this all wrong!"

Turning the car around, she headed straight back to their home and, once inside, immediately called the school.

"Hello? Yes, this is Ms. Ryan. I'm calling to let you know that my daughter will *not* be able to come to school today due to the *trauma* she suffered at

the hands of some very cruel students there! I need to speak with Vice Principal Tanner immediately!"

Josh listened absently as his mother cemented the end of the only real friendships he'd ever had.

"Good morning, Mr. Tanner. Yes, Tracy and David Edwards, who had been good friends with my daughter before she transitioned, were both *very* cruel to her yesterday and terminated a life-long friendship with her, just because she's transgendered!"

Hearing a pause, Josh almost felt a twinge of hurt at the thought of never reconciling with his best friends, but there was nothing he could do.

"That would be *fine*! Yes! I absolutely agree! Sensitivity courses for the three of them I'm sure would see to it that they will, at very least, never bother my daughter again! Yes, thank you *so* much Mr. Tanner! I'm *so* glad this school district is so *progressive* in its policies! *Yes!* I'll let you know as soon as Jocelyn is recovered. Alright! Goodbye!"

Sensitivity courses? he pondered. *For Tracy, David... and Reggie? Yeah... they're never gonna forgive me!*

Melanie went into Fred's office and explained about 'Jocelyn' and why they would both be home today. After a few minutes, Fred came out and looked down at Josh sitting on the couch, apparently catatonic. Crouching down in front of him, Fred took the boy's tiny hands into his own.

"Princess? I wish I could make the world a better place for you. All I can do is be there for you, protect you how I can, and love you unconditionally. I hope that's enough!" Folding Josh into a warm hug, he was disappointed when Josh didn't return it as he'd done the day before. Letting Josh go, his father stood back up with his fists clenched. "I hope those kids get what's coming to them!" he growled. "They should all three be *expelled*! Hurting

my sweet daughter like that! And for what? Just because she's being *honest* about herself?"

"Now, Fred!" Melanie tried to calm him, "We don't want to upset poor Jocelyn any more than she has been *already*, right? Just... go on back to work and let *me* take care of this."

While Fred wandered back to his office, Melanie led Josh up the stairs and into the bathroom across from the boy's girl room. Still just going where he was directed, Josh let his mother strip him of his clothes while a bath ran in the tub; the sweet scent of bubble-gum filling the air.

"I know you're a little *old* for a bubble bath sweetie, but I did a *lot* of reading about this, and I know you missed out on so much of just getting to be a little girl! So consider today, 'Jocelyn's Day'! We'll get you all clean, put you in a pretty nightgown, and then sit and watch movies together!" Hoping that it would at least make her 'daughter' smile, Melanie was disappointed when all she got as a response was a tear rolling down the cheek of her only child who was lost in a fugue state.

Josh was barely aware of what was going on. All his senses were cut off, numb, and fuzzy. When he started to revive from his catatonia, he realized with some shock that he was wearing a pink *Little Mermaid* nightgown and sitting next to his mother with *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* on the TV.

"Um... what happened? How did I get *here*? Where are my clothes? Why aren't I in school?"

Pausing the movie, Melanie smiled as Josh starting to become fully aware again. "Oh, sweetheart! I was getting a little worried! Your poor psyche took a *terrible* blow yesterday. You were in *no* condition to go to school! Don't worry! I talked to Mr. Tanner and *you* aren't in any trouble! He said you can take as much as two weeks to recover before you need to go back, alright? I also called my office and told them they'd have to do without me for as long

as needed while we get you better. Alright? So you see, Jocelyn? There's *nothing* to feel bad about!"

Hearing her words and piecing together the parts of the day that he could remember, he became very self-conscious of what he was wearing. "Um... *Mom*? Can... can I go change into my *old* PJs?"

Turning off the movie, Melanie turned and faced Josh and put on a serious face and tone. "Jocelyn, you can't keep running back to your *old* life. It won't fix anything, and it's not what's in your best interests. Your father and I know what's *best* for you. We got rid of all the clothes you took to camp. That life is no longer a part of you. I know you're scared, maybe even mad or hurt, but you *have* to believe that we're just doing what's needed to help you and see to it that you become a productive member of society in whatever way you choose! But you can't do *any* of that if you don't stop trying to escape who you *are*. Do you understand?"

Seeing that he was now not only without any allies, but also no longer given any options, Josh simply gave up and acquiesced. "Yes, Mom."

"Not 'Mommy'?" Melanie asked curiously. Seeing Josh about to cave in to that too, she shook her head. "That's OK, sweetie! I know you're growing up, and you haven't called me 'Mommy' for a while! I... I guess I'll just have to miss hearing my daughter call me 'Mommy', is all. Mom is *fine*!"

Nodding in understanding, Josh was still feeling uncomfortable in only a nightgown and underwear. The flimsy material was almost see-through, making him feel nearly naked. "*Mom*? Could I go get... um... *dressed*?"

Smiling that he no longer seemed to be trying to hide in his old boy's life any longer, Melanie nodded. "I'll have to help you the first time sweetie, unless you've been doing a lot of research on your own about how a *bra* works!"

Shaking his head no, he shrugged and simply accepted his fate. Broken and tired of fighting his parents' drive to make him a girl, he relented.

The two climbed the stairs; his mother chatting on about teaching him color matching, how to coordinate an outfit, and how to style hair. As they reached the door to his room, Melanie laughed lightly. "One thing you *won't* be far behind on is makeup! Girls your age usually haven't had much experience with it either, so you won't be *too* far behind in *that* department, at least!"

About to open his closet, Melanie asked him, "Dress or no?"

Still shaken from the evening before with Tracy, he shook his head slowly. "I... I saw there were some *pants* in the closet. Can I just start with *those*?"

Worried that he was still trying to retreat into boyhood to escape the pain of his transition, she almost insisted on at least a skirt before she imagined what he'd look like in girl's slacks. "Alright. One step at a time!" Opening that side of the closet, Melanie took out a pair of black slacks and a navy blue top. Moving the doors again, she pulled out a silver belt and a pair of black flats. "One *step* at a time!" she joked, holding up the shoes. Going to the dresser, she pulled out a pair of knee-high socks, black panties, and a dark blue bra.

"I already have underwear on, Mom." Josh pointed out.

"You're wearing *white* underwear, sweetheart." she advised. "Since you'll be wearing black slacks, you need to match the undies to the outfit so they don't show through the material." Removing the nightgown in one swift move, Melanie handed Josh the black panties and turned her back. After she heard Josh say he was done, she told him to try to hide his privates between his legs and turned back around. When he once again finished and said so, she turned back around, smiled, and handed him the bra. Instructing him in its use, she helped him into it and adjusted the straps for him.

"Next time you'll have to make sure to adjust the straps yourself, sweetie." Seeing him nod, she had him put on the socks and slacks, giggling a little when he became confused about the button being 'the wrong way around'. Handing him the top, she watched as he pulled it over his head before giving him the flats.

Slipping his feet into the girl's shoes, he felt it odd that he didn't have laces or velcro to close to keep them on.

"Now, come over here and sit at your console set, sweetie."

"You mean the desk with the mirror?"

Laughing, she nodded. "Yes, the desk with the mirror. Women use it to do hair and makeup. People used to call it a *vanity*, but that's *very* misogynistic! They called it that because *supposedly* all women are vain! That's why we call it a *console set*." Taking hairspray, some spray-on conditioner, and a brush, she teased his hair into a semblance of a girl's style and showed him how to duplicate the effect. "When I take you to the salon, they'll trim your hair a little, but don't worry! We'll let it grow out if you want! Shaping it properly will just make it much more becoming in the meantime!"

His head dizzy with too many new ideas, Josh hardly noticed the beginner's lesson on makeup, other than a seemingly nonsensical expression, 'Less is more'. When he looked in the mirror, what he saw stunned him speechless. He looked like a twin sister to himself. Fighting the urge to rail against the image and break the mirror for showing it to him, he meekly submitted to his mother putting magnetic earrings and a heart-shaped locket on him.

"*There!*" she proclaimed happily. Making him stand and look at himself in the mirrored doors of the closet to see his whole image, she beamed with pride. "You look so much like me when *I* was your age!" she stated almost tearfully.

Taking Josh's hand, Melanie led him down the stairs and to the doorway of Fred's office. Knocking gently on the doorframe, the two watched as Fred, his back still to them, held up a finger to let them know that he heard them, but needed a minute to complete his thought.

Typing quickly, he tapped the save button and turned in his chair. "Yes?" he asked before his eyes locked onto the small child with his wife. Stunned at how naturally feminine his child looked, his smile spread slowly across his face until his whole expression was lit up with pride. "*Princess!* You look *beautiful!* Just like your mother!" he added as he glanced up at his attractive wife. Getting up slowly, he walked over to Josh before getting down on his knees and lovingly embracing his 'daughter'. "I *love* you, my little princess!" Looking up at his wife he asked, "Is *princess* alright to use? It's not *demeaning*, is it?"

Melanie shook her head slowly. "Not in this case, I don't think. It depends on how *Jocelyn* feels about it." After Fred slowly let go his child and stood back up, the two looked down at him. "Jocelyn, sweetie? Do *you* mind your daddy calling you princess?"

Josh was confused. His parents were happy and they were treating him with more care, love, and affection than any time he could remember since he first began fighting with them about his identity. *I guess I should have just given in.* he reasoned. *Then they would have been happy sooner.* Now that he had no friends, he was in desperate need of love from the only source he could get it. Shrugging, Josh sighed. "It's better than 'pumpkin'. No *offense*, Daddy."

The two happy parents laughed at the truthful answer. "I'm *sorry*, princess! It's just I'd been calling you pumpkin since you were a little baby b... *baby.*" he covered his near slip-up. In truth, Fred could not think of the child whose diapers he had changed as a girl. Still, he was dedicated and single-minded when it came to the happiness of who he thought his child was.

"*That's* OK, Daddy." Josh answered. "If you call me pumpkin sometimes, it'll be alright. Just not in front of *other* people, please?"

Taking on a serious voice, he nodded. "I'll do my *best*, princess! I can't promise I won't mess up sometimes, because Daddy is human too, but I *will* promise that I'll always *try*. Alright?"

"Alright, Daddy." he answered emptily. "I should email my teachers and have them send me what assignments I missed today, so I don't fall behind. I... I miss school."

"It's only been one day, sweetheart!" Melanie pointed out. "You don't know how *proud* I am that you take your education so seriously! You go on and do that! I'll be in after a short talk with your father about some things."

Wandering off to his room, Josh entered it and paused a moment. *This is my life now. I'm a girl, not a boy. Girl! It'll just make everything easier if I just do what they say. They do love me, so they must be right that this is what's best for me.* Steeling himself, he marched over to his laptop that was sitting on his beautiful nightstand, opened it, and waited for it to power up. *I'm a girl!* he insisted to himself. *My name is Jocelyn Viola Ryan! I'm a girl and I'll be happy as a girl!*

When the desktop appeared, he brought up his email and nearly cried with frustration when he saw his old name still written there. *Why can't they love me as Josh? Why do I have to be a girl for them to love me like this?*

Dismissing the thought, he typed in his password, which also nearly made him cry since it was Tracy's middle name. As the inbox filled, he saw the most recent one was from David. Afraid to open it, he couldn't help himself as he clicked on it, desperate to learn if he perhaps still had at least one friend left and therefore some slim hope of getting his old life back. Reading the email though, his hope shattered.

Josh, (or should I say Jocelyn)

You are such a jerk! Tracy came home last night, bawling her eyes out! She said you threw her out and told her you weren't friends anymore! I thought I knew you, but no. You're just a selfish asshole! You think you're the only one with problems? Everyone has problems! Now I find out you're really transitioning! You lied to us, jerkoff! Your best friends! Who was there when your parents kept saying you were gay? Tracy and me! We helped you every way we could, you selfish prick! Your not who we thought you were!

Tracy and I now have to go to some lame-ass 'Sensitivity Training' class after school. With Reggie, of all people! And Mr. Tanner said it's because of you! Because you think we were mean to you! How many times were you mean to me? I knew you weren't serious when you'd call me a fag and shit! All I said was that you shoulda fought harder to let Mr. Tanner know you weren't really trans! But I guess now I know why you didn't! I guess you should be protected, same as me, but you could have just told us! We'd of accepted you! But no! You had to push us away! Just because we remind you of your old life! Well, fine! Hope you enjoy being a freak of nature!

Don't bother writing back. I'm blocking your email as soon as I send this! Good riddence, tranny!

David, your EX-friend!

Tears rolled down his cheeks as he read the email. Now certain he was alone in the world, friendless and trapped in a life not his own, he closed the laptop and just lay down on his bed.

By the time Melanie came upstairs, Josh was asleep on his bed and still dressed. Assuming that he was only tired from his emotional ordeal, she just covered him with an afghan, kissed him on the forehead, turned off the light, and closed the door.

Chapter 5 - The Things We Do to Get Along

Waking up in the dark, Josh looked around the room and saw out the window that it was night. Stretching, he felt a funny pain from his ears. Reaching up to rub his earlobes, he felt the magnetic earring fall off and onto his bed somewhere. The memory of his mother dressing him like a girl for the first time came flooding back to him. Almost getting angry about it, he then remembered the email from David and resigned himself to the fact that in order to get along with everyone, he was going to have to pretend to be the girl that everyone now expected him to be.

Getting up, he stumbled over to his door and turned on the light. Fishing around in his bed, he located the missing earring and took it over to the closet mirror. Hating the sight of himself looking so girly, he pushed the feelings down inside himself and forced a smile. He was pretty. He could at least be honest with himself about that. It was then that he most especially noticed the two obvious 'bumps' rounding out the front of his top that gave him a very nice young girl's figure. If he'd seen himself at school dressed this way, he'd have been tempted to ask himself out. That thought made him giggle a little as he put the earring back on his ear.

Going over to the vanity, he hesitated only a moment before he sat down and forced himself to fix his hair the way his mother had shown him. Satisfied that he was 'all put together' again, he got up and left his room. Coming down the stairs, Josh heard his parents talking at the dining room table. Slowing, he listened carefully.

"So anyway, it turns out in Ohio she *can't* get her birth certificate changed. That's the law... for *now*." Fred stated.

"That is so barbaric!" Melanie fumed. "How about the name change?"

"Wheels are rolling!" he answered optimistically. "The county doesn't require her to attend the hearing. We can do it *for* her. That way she won't

be subjected to any further harassment. I already filed the paperwork, and the notice will be in the News-Herald tomorrow. Our court date is for Monday the tenth of next month. I think that's about everything."

"You're such a good father to her!" Melanie smiled. "I understand most fathers react very badly when their daughters transition! I think she and I are *both* very lucky to have you!"

Hearing his parents kiss made Josh roll his eyes as he sat on the steps. *Well, that's it.* he contemplated. *Next month I'll have the name my parents want me to have and they'll be happy. It'll just be easier this way.* Even as the sadness of it all threatened to consume him, he shook off the feeling, pushed it aside, and stood up, making sure to make noise as he descended the stairs.

"Jocelyn?" his mother called out.

"Coming, Mom." he answered as he made his way to the dining room. Stopping in the entryway, he made sure to fold his hands in front of him as he'd seen girls do all the time.

"*Well!*" Melanie exclaimed. "Did you fix your hair all by yourself, sweetie?"

Nodding at his mother's approval, Josh forced a smile. "Yes, Mom. Just like you showed me."

Hugging her child in pride, Melanie crouched down to look at him in the eye with a smile. "Sweetheart? I was thinking it would be nice to maybe have dinner out tonight? Do you think you're ready for that?"

The thought of going out in public dressed like a girl made his blood run cold, but he knew he could 'man-up' and face anything he chose to. "I... I'm scared... but I won't let that *stop* me!"

Hugging him once more, she took his hand. "Well Fred? Your *ladies* await!"

Grabbing wallet, keys, and purse, the two walked out the front door. When Josh crossed the threshold and stepped outside, his heart was beating so hard he thought it might explode from his chest. He only hesitated a moment before he set his shoulders, raised his chin, and confidently strode out the door. His parent's each took hold of one of his hands as they went down the walk toward Melanie's Prius.

Glad that it was dark out, Josh sat in the back seat while his mother drove them to a nearby restaurant. Watching the world through the window, he felt a pang of loss as they passed the cross street where Tracy and David lived. He could almost see their house as they sped by.

Parking in front of the restaurant, his parents got out and Fred opened the door for him to join them. Fear still gripping his heart, he forced himself to undo the seatbelt and slide out of the car. The three walked together toward the front door, Josh gulping as he hoped he could 'pass' and not be seen as a boy in girl's clothes. Then he found himself hoping he *didn't* pass, that finally the observations of other adults that he was obviously a boy would get his parents to listen to reason. He gave up on that idea as he remembered what he'd looked like in the mirror, still full of fear though as the hostess walked up to them.

"*Hi*, folks! I'm Linda!" she smiled. "Table for three, or are more coming?"

"Just three." Melanie stated.

Crouching down to his level, the hostess smiled at him, making his brain shut off for a moment.

"What's *your* name?" she asked sweetly.

Finally regaining his senses enough to realize she'd asked him a question, he stammered, "Josh-*elyn*." Flushing at nearly 'outing' himself to the first person he met, he tried to smile past it.

"*Joshelyn?*" she asked, quizzically. Slowly her face went from confused to understanding. "Oh! *Jocelyn!* Sorry! Sometimes I think I'm going *deaf* with all the pots and pans clanging in the kitchen!" Standing up, she addressed his parents. "Will *Jocelyn* need a children's menu?"

"She's *twelve*, young lady." Melanie said sternly. "She'll have a *regular* menu, thank you."

Her smile melting under Melanie's withering glare, Linda nodded. "My mistake. If you'll follow me, please?" Leading the trio to a corner booth, she placed the menus on the table and waited for them to be seated. "Your server will be out shortly. Anything I can get you in the meantime?"

"No *thank* you." Melanie stated coldly.

"Could I get a glass of water, Mom?" Josh asked softly.

"*Certainly*, sweetie!" she smiled. Turning to Linda, it melted into a frown. "A small glass of water for *Jocelyn*. *We'll* order with the *server*."

Seeing the pretty young woman walk away upset, Josh gulped in fear before he asked a question barely above a whisper. "Did... did I mess up *bad*, Mom? I'm just *used* to Josh."

"It's alright, sweetheart!" she consoled him. "You didn't do *anything* wrong! The young *lady* did when..."

"*Linda*." he interrupted her. "Her name is *Linda*."

Slightly taken aback by the interruption and for how particular he was being that she use the young woman's name, Melanie was caught speechless for a moment.

"Princess?" Fred jumped in. "It's not polite to interrupt."

"Sorry." he demurred.

Collecting herself, Melanie resumed her explanation. "Anyway sweetie, the young lady... *Linda*... assumed you were a small child, just because you're small for your age. That was *wrong* of her."

"She *asked* if I needed a children's menu." he pointed out, using his most deferential tone. "Doesn't that mean she wasn't assuming *anything*?" He knew his parents well enough to know they wouldn't yell at him for debating them. In fact, they'd encouraged him to all his life.

"She has a point, Mel." Fred opined as a neutral observer.

"It wasn't that!" Melanie retorted. "It was the way she *greeted* Jocelyn! Like she was *five*!"

"I thought it was nice!" Josh offered in counterpoint. "Linda made me feel like a real *person* and not just a child with hi... her *parents*."

Fred smiled. "She *has* you, Mel! Perception isn't as important as how she made Jocelyn feel!"

Defeated, Melanie sighed. "Alright. So long as she made you *feel* good, then I guess no *harm* was done. She still should have *asked* how old you were."

Just as Fred was about to make a counterpoint, Linda returned with a glass of water for Josh. "*Here* you are, Jocelyn! Your server will be *right* out." she told his parents. As she was turning to go, Melanie caught her attention.

"Just a moment." she said softly. "I wanted to apologize for my rudeness. You were just trying to be nice. That was very thoughtful of you."

Smiling at the backhanded apology that she took to be sincere, Linda looked at Josh. "It's *fine*! Really! It's just she's so *adorable*!"

"She *is... isn't* she?" Melanie smiled.

Blushing, Josh couldn't look back at the lovely young woman paying him so much attention.

After Linda departed, a man in his twenties came up. "*Hello!* I'm Brian! I'll be your server for tonight!"

Getting Melanie and Fred's drink orders and leaving to fill them, Melanie turned to Josh. "He's cute! *Right*, Jocelyn?"

Hardly reacting, Josh shrugged as he put the glass of water back down after taking a sip. "I *guess*. If you say so."

Furrowing her brow, his mother pondered Josh's seeming lack of interest in their quite attractive server. "I know when *I* was your age, a young man like that would have made me feel *very* nice!" she pointed out.

As the evening progressed, Melanie tried repeatedly to draw out Josh's opinions on what he found attractive in a boy. Meanwhile, Fred just sat and observed the two without comment.

Getting ready to leave, Linda waved at Josh as they walked toward the door. "Thanks for coming, folks! *Bye* Jocelyn!"

Josh couldn't help but smile, giggle a little, blush, and turn away at Linda's attention. Walking out the door, he managed to turn, look at her watching him leave, and wave goodbye to her.

Getting in the car and waiting a moment for it to warm up, Fred finally commented, "That was a *lovely* meal. Not as lovely as the *company*, though!"

"Oh! So the Sphinx *speaks!*" Melanie quipped. "I was beginning to think that your vegetarian lasagna had been mixed with *super glue!*"

"Just wanted to sit and enjoy the evening is all." he offered in explanation. "That and I wanted to watch Jocelyn. Make sure she was OK. This *was* kind of a big day for her!"

Putting the car in gear, his wife shook her head. "Still, you weren't very good *company*, Fred."

"I'll explain more when we got home, Mel." he stated cryptically. "Suffice it to say, I think we may have *goofed* on something."

"Oh, you can't say something like *that* and not explain!" Melanie exclaimed as she pulled into the light traffic. "*What* have we goofed?"

"*Later* please, Mel." he said, glancing back at Josh.

"*Fine!*" she shot back, frustratedly. "*Later!*"

When they returned home, Josh was sent off to take a shower and change for bed while Melanie and Fred talked privately in their bedroom.

Stripping out of his clothes, Josh almost felt like his normal boyish self as he showered, until he noticed his normal shower gel had been replaced with a girl's floral body wash. Likewise, his shampoo had been swapped for two smaller bottles, one labeled conditioner, that were covered in pictures of fruit. Sighing, he used the shampoo and read the directions for the conditioner.

By the time he was done, he felt even more trapped in the life of a girl than before. Combing out his hair, he did notice it was much easier than usual though. Thankful of at least that much, he wrapped his towel around his waist and came out of the bathroom, only to run into his mother just walking past the door.

"*Sweetie!*" she yelled quietly. "You need to cover your chest with the towel, dear! Your father shouldn't be able to see your chest!"

Blushing with embarrassment as his mother unwrapped the towel and re-wrapped it around his chest, he listened as his mother clucked her tongue.

"You should also wrap your hair in a towel." she added. "You'll need to dry it and brush it out before bedtime."

"Why?" he asked simply.

"It helps your hair look *prettier*." she explained. "It also makes it easier to manage in the morning."

"Oh."

"Now scoot into your room and get dressed for bed!" she said with a sigh.

Holding up the towel with one hand as he closed the door behind him, he went over to the dresser and opened the drawer full of slips and nightgowns. Shuddering that he had no choice but to wear one as he had no PJs anymore, he grabbed the nightgown on top, which was green and had Tinkerbell on the front, and threw it on his bed. Opening the underwear drawer, he was about to just grab any pair when he stopped.

I gotta do this. he grumbled to himself. I have to be a girl. It's what everyone expects of me now. Even Tracy and David. Thinking about his former friends made him almost start to cry, but he just pushed the feelings aside again and shook his head to clear it. No! I can do this! I can be a girl and like it! It's not so bad, really. At least I get a lot of attention.

Remembering what his mother told him, he looked over the underwear and picked out a green pair nearly the same shade as the nightgown. Putting them both on, he looked at himself in the closet mirror.

They're right. he concluded. I look like a girl. I guess I always have. Sighing in resignation, he went over to the vanity and opened the drawer containing

his hair dryer. Plugging it in, he dried his hair with his towel, then began to blow it. Taking the brush, he did his best to brush it out, but only ended up getting the brush stuck in his hair. Frustrated, he wanted nothing more at that moment than to get out a pair of scissors and chop it all off.

Just then he heard a gentle knock on the door. "Come in." he sighed.

Melanie came in and gave a pained smile at his predicament. "Here, sweetie. Let me show you again." Untangling the brush, she explained how to brush out his hair like a girl again, making sure he took the brush several times to do it himself. "*There!* See? Not too hard!"

Giving a weak smile, he nodded to her. "Thank you for helping me, Mom. I *really* do want to try to be the best daughter I can for you."

Pulling him into a hug, Melanie sighed. "You *are*, sweetheart! Even if you didn't look *anything* like a girl, you'd *still* be the best daughter ever!"

Luxuriating in the affection, Josh sighed contentedly.

"Now, let's go downstairs. Put on your robe and slippers first, though. You shouldn't be out of your room in just a nightgown."

"How come I was earlier?" he asked as he pushed his arms into the sleeves of the fuzzy pink robe.

"That was a special circumstance, sweetheart." she explained as she closed the robe and tied the belt in a bow. "That was *girl* time, just you and me. Your father wasn't allowed in the living room."

Slipping his feet in the soft pink slippers, he giggled a little as they tickled his toes. "Oh. OK." Taking his mother's hand, they walked down the stairs together and into the living room where his father was sitting on the couch reading a book.

"*There's my princess!*" he smiled, setting the book aside. "Come sit next to Daddy!"

Climbing up on the couch and turning around to sit next to his father, he was surprised when his mother sat alongside, the two adults flanking him.

"Your mother and I wanted to talk to you about something." Fred began.

Groaning inside, he knew this routine. *They're going to tell me something else about me that they think I'm not going to like! What else? Am I adopted? No... I think I'd like that!*

"Sweetie? Your father and I were talking about some things we observed about you tonight." Melanie explained. "You didn't seem to care all that much about Brian."

"*Who?*" he asked, honestly confused.

"The young man who was our server?" Melanie asked, hoping it would spark a response.

"What was the name of the woman that *greeted* us?" Fred fished.

"*Linda!*" Josh smiled and blushed as he remembered the smile on her face.

Fred looked up at Melanie and smirked. "*Told* you!"

"No one likes a know-it-all, Fred!" Melanie said irritably. Sighing, she gave in to Fred's obviously correct interpretation of the situation. "Sweetie? I know you kept telling us that you and Davie had always just been friends. Since we assumed incorrectly that you were a boy, and that since Davie was gay and you were his closest friend, that you *liked* him... like a *boyfriend*. That wasn't true, *was* it?"

Josh shook his head slowly. *You mean now, after he isn't my friend anymore, they're going to finally admit they were wrong? Grrahhh!*

"Jocelyn?" Fred got his attention. "We know now that we were right all along, but for entirely the wrong reasons. You *are* gay, we *knew* that, but since you see yourself as a *girl*..." His voice trailed off, unsure how to say what he was trying to get at.

"We know that you're a *lesbian*, sweetheart. We still love you!" Melanie finished for him.

Stunned, Josh was about to explode at his parents for doing it again; telling him who he was without asking. Formulating how he was going to deny their claims, he realized that he in fact did like girls, and since he was honestly trying to learn to like being a girl, then what they were saying was true, from a certain point of view. Finding the revelation that they had actually guessed right for once even *more* stunning, he couldn't help but giggle. *I guess that old saying is right! Even a stopped clock is right twice a day!*

"What's so funny, sweetie?" Melanie asked puzzled. "It's *not* a dirty word!"

"*Oh!*" Josh exclaimed. "I know it isn't, Mom. It's just that... well... I guess I just figured that out for *myself!* I mean, that I... I like girls..." Remembering to include himself, he corrected it by saying, "I mean, that I like *other* girls... so I guess that *does* make me a lesbian. I... I just never thought about it before."

Sighing in relief that he didn't fight them on this revelation, Melanie shook her head. "I guess I'll just have to be the only one in the house that can appreciate the male form!"

"I, for one, am *delighted* about the prospect!" Fred opined. Seeing Melanie and Josh look at him, he smirked. "*What?* You think I was looking forward to seeing my baby girl go out on a date with her first *boyfriend?* I may be

open-minded, but I'm still her *father!* Especially seeing as how beautiful she is!"

Blushing at his father's praise, Josh felt a warm glow inside at how he was being treated, but at the same time sad that he had never been praised for being handsome.

"Well, it's after your bedtime, princess!" Fred pointed out as he hugged Josh with one arm. "Give me a hug and kiss and then off to bed!"

Still feeling happy at the compliment, Josh hugged his father tightly and kissed him quickly on the cheek. Turning to his mother, he hugged her, though not as enthusiastically. "Night, Mom. Goodnight, Daddy."

Climbing down, Josh padded his way to the stairs then up to his room. Closing the door, he looked at the room and still shuddered at how girly it was. *Oh well.* he mused. *I guess I'll just have to get used to it.* Taking off his slippers and putting them next to his bed, he set his alarm before returning the robe to its hook.

Turning out the light, he got into bed just as he remembered that he'd never gotten around to emailing his teachers. Pulling the laptop over to him from the nightstand, he opened it and waited for it to come up. As soon as it did, he saw the email from David still open. Nearly making him cry again, he shook himself and closed it. *Fine! David wants to be a jerk and not give me a chance to give my side of the story? He can just go take a flying leap!* Composing himself, he opened a new email and quickly typed out a letter.

Hi!

I wanted to first say I am sorry I wasn't in school today. I am going to do my best to try and not miss too much school. Could you please send me my assignments for Wednesday and Thursday? That way I don't fall behind! I really miss school and hope to be back soon.

Thank you!

Jocelyn Viola Ryan

P.S. I guess I'll have to change my email soon. joshvryan doesn't really fit me anymore. Sorry for the confusion. I'll let you know what my new email is as soon as I get it.

Pulling out his school notebook, he entered in the email addresses for all his teachers and clicked the send button before he realized that he was offline. *Duh, stupid! Daddy's network isn't online after he gets off work!* Knowing that his email would go out as soon as his father went online in the morning, he closed the laptop.

He was just about to lay down when he heard a noise from his phone. Picking it up and flipping it open, he saw that he'd just gotten a text message. Pushing the button to open it, his stomach lurched when he saw it was from Tracy.

jocelyn. like the name. thought you were a boy. change your mind? i don't understand. call me pls?

Closing his cell phone, he put it down and quietly picked up the handset for his bedroom phone. Hearing the dial tone, he quietly dialed Tracy's number and only had to wait one ring before it picked up.

"*Jocelyn?*" Tracy answered.

"Yeah." Josh whispered.

"I'm so *confused!*" she nearly cried. "I thought you told me you were a *boy!* Now at school they say you want to be a *girl?* Is this just your parents *making* you or is this what *you* want?"

Wondering how to answer her question, Josh sighed. "I.. I don't really *know* anymore, Trace." he whispered. "I'm just tired of *fighting* them! I don't think

I really *want* to be a girl, but... well... it's just *easier* this way. Daddy and Mom took away all my camp clothes, so I don't really have any choice. I guess maybe I'll learn to like it."

"*Wait!* They took away your *camp* clothes? Then you *have* to dress like a girl now? Even at *school*?"

"When I go back, yeah. Mom wouldn't *let* me go today. I guess I kinda sorta blacked out on the way there. I don't know when I'll be back. Maybe next week."

"I... I wanted to say I'm sorry for being such a manipulative bitch to you, Joss. Can I call you Joss?"

"Sure. It's fine, Trace." Giggling a little, he tried to stay quiet. "*Sorry!* Joss and Trace just sounds funny!" Hearing his best friend's laughter filled his heart with hope. "*Trace?* I still like girls and I don't like boys. Is that weird?"

"*No!*" Tracy shouted quietly. "*It's fine!* You're not weird! You're *you*, and I *like* you! I just don't *like-like* you, OK?"

Pausing as he tried to repress his giggles, Josh heard footsteps coming up the stairs. "Gotta go, Trace! I'll talk to you tomorrow! *Bye!*"

"*Love* you Joss! *Bye!*" Tracy barely got in before Josh hung up the phone quietly.

Getting under his covers, he was just settling down when he heard the gentle knocking. "Come in?" he said softly.

Melanie crept in with Fred right behind her. "Just wanted to tuck you in, sweetie!" she said with a smile.

"You haven't done that for a long time!" he retorted. "I'm OK! I'm a big... *girl*." he self-corrected.

"We know, sweetie." she said in a whisper. "But we just wanted you to know how proud we are of you! You were very grown up tonight, but you're still our little girl!"

Biting his lower lip at the compliment that felt like an insult, he looked away, ashamed that he still hated to hear his mother call him a girl.

Melanie tucked him in tenderly and placed a kiss on his forehead, gently running her fingers through his hair before stepping back to let Fred in.

"Goodnight, sweetheart!" she sighed.

Fred just leaned over him and kissed his forehead. "*Night*, princess! Pretty dreams!"

Once his parents left his room and closed his door, Josh tried to settle back and relax, but sleep eluded him for almost two hours while he tried to figure out just how he was going to learn to like being a girl when he hated it so much.

Chapter 6 - Self-Deception

Waking when his alarm sounded as usual, Josh turned it off and slowly stretched, trying to clear the cobwebs out of his head. As he opened his eyes, he was confronted by the reality of his situation as the short sleeve of his nightgown came into view. Slowly he remembered the previous day and how he'd caved to his parents' insistence that he was a girl.

Looking down at the ridiculously pretty fairy decorating the front of his garment, he sighed as he remembered he had little choice in the matter, save which ridiculously pretty thing he would wear.

Getting up, he stumbled across the hall into the bathroom, did the necessary, and returned to his room after washing his hands. Now he was faced with the greatest dilemma of his life; what to wear.

Looking in the closet, he noticed that there were only two more pairs of slacks and a pair of girl's designer jeans. *Well, I guess I need to get used to it.* Looking over his choices, he started going through the skirts and tried to find one that he thought wouldn't be too horrible to wear. Finding a jean skirt with no flowers, designs, or other overly girly patterns on it, he pulled it out and looked at it like examining an insect. Putting it on his bed, he went through the blouses and tops. He settled on a simple black top that the only thing girly about it was a small glittery butterfly on the front over the heart that was in subtle colors of dark red and green, so not very noticeable.

Putting it on the bed, he went to his dresser and pulled out a black bra, but stopped when he started looking through the underwear. Unsure, he tried to remember how Tracy looked when she wore her jean skirt. He'd never really paid that much attention to her clothes, but after thinking back he grabbed a pair of black underwear, then pulled out a pair of black tights. Undressing and getting into his clothes, he struggled for a while trying to determine how to put the tights on. Eventually he figured it out, then put on the top and skirt.

Walking over to the closet, he paused in front of the mirror to examine himself. Straightening the skirt, he found it irritating that there was no way to make sure you had it on the right way front. Opening the closet, he retrieved the pair of black and pink tennis shoes and put them on.

Fixing his hair in the vanity mirror, he looked at the jewelry and balked. There were too many choices and he'd never noticed a girl's jewelry before. The only thing he picked up was the heart locket that he'd worn the day before. Putting it on, he looked at himself once more before taking it off.

Well, I don't look horrible. I look ridiculous in this, but at least I look like a girl, anyway. Looking at his clock, he saw it was nearly six and his parents would be up soon. Not having any schoolwork to do, and knowing that his email wouldn't be sent until eight, he made his way down to the kitchen.

Readying his mother's morning cup of tea, he poured himself a bowl of cereal and sat down at the dining room table to eat. When the teapot began to whistle, he jumped up and turned off the heat; pouring the hot water into a cup with a teabag in it. He was just about to turn around when his mother's voice startled him.

"*Jocelyn?*" Melanie said tiredly.

Drawing in a sharp breath and spinning in place, he saw his mother peering down at him smiling. "*Mom!*"

"Didn't mean to startle you, sweetheart!" she apologized. "You picked that out all on your own? You look *lovely!*"

Looking at the floor and nodding solemnly, he pushed aside the feelings of self-loathing at being called 'lovely' and swallowed hard. "Thank you."

Looking at the steaming cup of tea steeping on the counter, she petted Josh's hair gently. "Is that for me, honey?" Seeing him nod, she sighed. "You're

such a wonderful daughter!" she glowed as she added her sweetener to the cup. "*Thank you!*"

Shrugging, Josh cleared his throat. "I... I didn't know what jewelry to wear. Do I really look *alright?*"

Looking him over, she nodded in approval. "Very nice, sweetie. I think I would have gone with different *shoes*, but that's a personal choice."

Glad that he at least looked OK to other people's eyes, he went back to his breakfast bowl. "I realized the email I sent my teachers last night won't get to them until Daddy goes online after he starts work, so I won't get any of my makeup work until this afternoon, probably." he pointed out.

Watching him as she sipped her tea, she nodded in understanding. "That's alright. It gives us the day to go down and get your hair fixed."

Pausing mid-bite, he groaned inwardly. *My hair? Ug! Whatever!*

Sitting across the table from him, Melanie smiled. "Do you know what sort of hairstyle you want?"

Immediately, an image of himself with a buzz cut sprang into his mind. Sighing inwardly and knowing it was impossible, he shook his head slowly. "Whatever you think best. I don't know that much about girls' hairstyles."

"We'll ask the stylist." his mother dismissed his concerns. "I'm sure my girl Rachel can make you look even more gorgeous than you *are!*"

Finishing his cereal, he rinsed the bowl and spoon and put them in the dishwasher as usual. Feeling at loose ends, he realized he didn't know what to do with himself. "When will we be going to... um... the hair salon?" he asked, stumbling over actually saying the words out loud about himself.

"I made an appointment for you at ten, so we should be leaving by nine-thirty." she answered as she finished her tea. "You can just play in your room until then... or watch TV if you like!"

"I'll be in my room, Mom." he sighed. Making his way upstairs, he entered his room and closed the door. Looking at the time, he knew Tracy would be up and getting ready about now. Dropping down on the bed, he looked at the phone and felt an irresistible urge to pick it up and call her. Giving in, he dialed the familiar number and listened to it ring a few times before he heard her voice.

"*Hello?*" Tracy said with a curious tone.

"Hi, Trace. It's *J... Jocelyn.*"

"*Joss!*" she nearly yelled.

Suddenly the sound over the phone became muffled. He could hear someone else talking, but couldn't understand the words.

"I'm talking to a girlfriend from school, Mom!" he overheard. "I'll be at breakfast in five minutes! *I promise!*" A moment passed before she returned to the phone. "Joss? I can't talk long. What's up?"

"I was just wondering..." he began nervously. "...did... would you want to come over after school?"

"*Can I?*" she said hopefully. "I would *love* to!"

Gulping, he knew he had to tell Tracy what he told his mother. "Um... first I need to tell you something. I told Mom that... um... that you didn't like me anymore because I'm transitioning. I know I sorta lied and now it's my fault you have to do that dumb Sensitivity Class thing, but *believe* me, doing that *wasn't* my idea! That was *Mom!* I just didn't know what else to tell her and

she insisted I tell her *something*. So... I'd understand if you don't want to see me anymore. I was just sorta *hoping*..."

"Oh." Tracy said dejectedly. "Now it kinda makes sense. I probably *should* be super mad at you, but I'm just so happy we're still friends that I can't really *get* mad."

"You can punch me in the arm when you come over!" he offered.

Tracy took a moment while she giggled before she could answer. "You're so *weird*!"

Giggling along with her, Josh made himself get serious. "Anyway, Mom's like *super* POed at you and Dave now because she thinks you turned on me. Think you can manage a decent phony apology to her?"

"Are you *kidding* me? I do that all the time with Davie! Your mom's a total *sucker* for them by comparison! Remember that time she thought I was mad at you for being gay? I totally *snowed* her with that phony apology I gave you! I'm sorta used to it with your parents, anyway. They're always looking for *something* to be mad or offended about!"

"*Tell* me about it!" Josh conspired. "OK, so here's the plan then. You come over around four and do your thing. I'll beg her to give you another chance, and we'll be best friends again!"

"What about Davie?" Tracy asked uncertainly.

His smile melting away, Josh shook his head. "I don't know if he's ready to see me anytime soon... maybe *ever*. Especially the way he feels about girls." Josh admitted. "He sent me a pretty nasty email yesterday and blocked me from writing back, so I don't think we're gonna to be friends anymore." Suddenly, he heard Mrs. Edwards in the background on the other end of the phone line.

"Tracy Marie Edwards!" she shouted. "Get off that phone and get down to *breakfast!* You can talk to your friend at school!"

"But she's not *going* to school today, Mom!" Tracy whined and making Josh wince at the feminine reference. "She's staying home, probably for the rest of the *week!* I still have two and a half minutes!"

"Hurry it up, then!" Joyce Edwards shouted. "*Two minutes!*"

"Ug! *Moms!*" Tracy groaned. "I gotta go. I'll try and talk to Davie today and see if he'll listen to reason. No promises, though. He can be *such* an over-sensitive baby, sometimes!"

"*Thanks, Trace!*" Josh sighed in relief. "See you at four!"

"*Bye Joss!* I'm glad we're still friends! I think once you give being a girl a chance, you'll see that it's just how things are *supposed* to be! You are *such* a natural girl, anyway! See you at four!"

Hearing her hang up, Josh felt a pain in his heart at Tracy's parting words. *She doesn't really like you.* he heard echoing in his head. *She's just like your parents. She'll only like you if you pretend to be someone you aren't.* Sighing, he puttered around on his computer for a while before closing it and shaking himself out of his misery.

You gotta stop this! he thought. *You have to try to like being a girl! Everyone thinks you are one anyway... and you don't really have much choice! You have no boy clothes anymore, so you might as well learn to like it! At least now Daddy and Mom will stop bugging you about boys! It's just easier this way!*

Going to his closet, he took a breath and opened it to reveal the assortment of dresses his mother had bought for him. Repressing his revulsion, he took one down and looked at it. It was a cute floral summer dress that he'd love to

see Brenda wearing. Trying to imagine himself in it, he shuddered and stuck out his tongue in disgust. Hanging it back up, he spent the next hour and a half going through all the clothes in his closet learning what his options were, what he might be able to stand wearing, and sorting them his own way.

Looking over at the clock and seeing that it was just after eight, he went back to the computer and checked to see if his father was online. Seeing that he was and that his email had been sent, he checked his inbox, only to find it empty. Feeling lonely, he shrugged. *If I were in school, I'd be in PE right now.* He thought about looking online for some way to convince his parents he was a boy, but he knew his father monitored his online activity. *The last thing I need right now is them knowing I still think I'm a boy!*

Closing his laptop, he went back to his clothes and stared at the collection of skirts, blouses, and tops. Seeing a definite pattern, he shook his head. *Mom sure went all out to make sure I could only look girly!* Turning next to his jewelry, he sorted them his way and started trying them on, using his own judgement of what he thought he'd like to see on a girl. Finding a pair of pink pearl stud magnetic earrings, he smiled at the look with his outfit. *See? You can like being a girl!* he lied to himself.

While he was looking over the makeup, he heard the knock on his door. "Come on *in*, Mom." he sighed.

Melanie smiled as she walked in and saw what Josh was doing. "Having fun?" she asked.

Shrugging, he sighed and looked at her through the vanity mirror. "Just re-organizing things *my* way." he explained. "Time to go?"

"Just about." she answered. "I like the earrings! Good choice! You have a *lovely* sense of style! You might want to change to a pair of low heels with that outfit, though." she offered. "The jewelry dresses the outfit up more, but the tennis shoes dress it down."

Gulping at the idea of wearing heels, he shoved the feelings aside. Letting his mother pick out shoes, he put them on and practiced walking in them for a few minutes before he saw his mother looking at her watch.

"Time to go, sweetie." she advised. "We don't want to be late."

Giving in to the inevitable, Josh nodded and headed out of his room and down the stairs. Making his way to his father's office, he knocked gently at the door to say goodbye.

Turning at the sound, Fred grinned at the sight. "*Morning, princess!*" he glowed. "You look *beautiful!* Heading out with your mom?"

Nodding and shoving away the feelings of revulsion at being called beautiful by his own father, he forced a smile. "*Thanks, Daddy. Yeah, we're going to Mom's salon. I... I'm getting my hair styled.*"

"Need anything before you go? Any money?" he asked.

Blinking in shock at the suggestion of his father giving him money, Josh stared at the man wide-eyed. *Daddy? Giving me money? The same man that lectured me for two hours on the evils of consumerism that time I asked for three dollars to buy a Beyblade?* "Um... no. No thank you."

Walking over to Josh, he hugged him gently and smiled. "Just let me know if you need anything, alright? Gotta get back to work. Have *fun*, princess!"

"I will, Daddy." he sighed resignedly. "Bye."

Following his mother to the door, Josh felt his heart racing. Outside it was a bright sunny day, unlike the night before when it was dark out and he was dressed in black and hard to see. *Now I have to walk out the door, in broad daylight, wearing a skirt!* he shuddered. Petrified to a standstill and ready to run back to his bedroom, he mentally slapped himself. *Stop it!* he shouted at

himself. *You have to do this! You have to learn to just accept that this is how things are! You're a girl now, and you can't hide in your house forever! So stop sniveling like a baby and face it like a...* he stopped as he realized how much he was fooling himself.

"What's *wrong*, sweetheart?" Melanie asked as she walked back to him, having realized he wasn't following her anymore.

Shaking his head to clear it, he took a breath and let it out slowly. "Just *nervous*, Mom." he answered. "It's *one* thing to go out wearing slacks and a top after sunset, but wearing a *skirt*? In broad *daylight*?"

Looking at him, she shook her head. "You look *fine*! If anyone tries to harass you, they'll have *me* to answer to! Come *on*!" Holding out her hand, she waited for him to take it.

Pushing his fear and self-loathing aside once more, he took his mother's hand and forced himself toward the door.

Walking out the door turned out to be easier than he'd feared. It was just another day. The walk to his mother's car was likewise uneventful, as was getting in and riding to the salon. He did have to have a lesson from his mother on how to sit in a car in a skirt that made him blush embarrassedly, but no one was around to see, so he just shoved the feelings aside.

Once there, he again forced himself to go in the salon with all the pride of a condemned man who'd accepted his fate walking into the gas chamber; head held high.

Rachel turned out to be a nice lady who doted on Josh continuously, trying to build up his self-confidence that he was pretty and looked nothing like a boy without saying anything that would 'out' him. When she finished, Josh looked at himself in the mirror, holding back tears of sorrow as he pasted a phony smile on his face at the cute hairdo she'd given him.

Afterwards, Melanie took him to lunch. With each compliment he received, he died a little more inside as his boyish pride and male ego was assaulted on all sides. Stoically, he endured it and pushed forward, convinced that all he needed to do was learn to like it.

By the time they returned home, following a stop at Melanie's office and having to endure all the glowing praise and promises of support from her co-workers, Josh was exhausted from the mental anguish alone. Going upstairs, he checked his email and saw that four of his teachers had written back to him. Reading over the assignments, he pulled out his backpack and dove into the work, thankful that he could immerse himself in something other than hair, clothes, jewelry, makeup, and all things girly.

The next thing he knew he was hearing the doorbell ring. Quickly looking over at the clock, he saw it was five after four already. Slamming the math book closed, he raced downstairs just as Melanie was opening the door.

Tracy stood outside the door with a meek look of shame covering her face. "*Hello, Ms. Ryan.*"

Narrowing her eyes, she looked down at the girl as though she could freeze her solid with a glare. "What do *you* want, Miss Edwards?"

Looking at her shoes, Tracy gulped and looked helpless. "To tell Jocelyn I'm sorry for reacting so badly, Ms. Ryan. I feel *so* ashamed."

Skeptical, Melanie shook her head. "You did a very cruel thing, Tracy! Why should I trust you not to hurt poor Jocelyn *again*?"

Josh knew this was his cue. Walking up to his mother, he cleared his throat to let her know he was there. "*Mom? We should at least give Trace a chance to apologize. Everyone makes mistakes. It would be pretty narrow-minded of us not to at least hear her out, right?*" he added the last part, knowing it would force his mother's hand.

Tracy looked up and had to force herself not to smile at the sight of her best friend. Looking from Josh to Melanie, she gulped and pleaded with her eyes. "*Please*, Ms. Ryan! I don't know what came over me! I was just in shock, is all! It was like Josh *died*, but now I know he never really was there at all. It was *my* fault I couldn't see Jocelyn right there in front of me the whole time!" Tracy had rehearsed the line over and over until she knew she had it down pat and could deliver it with a straight face.

About to say something, Melanie was interrupted by Josh touching her arm. "Mom? *Please*? Give her a chance? She's my best *friend*!"

Overcome by her own guilty feelings of not having seen that her child was transgendered sooner, Melanie caved. "Very well. Come *in*, Tracy."

Stepping into the living room like a frightened deer, she looked over at Josh and smiled. "You look *beautiful*!" she said honestly.

Swallowing hard at what he felt was a backhanded compliment, he forced himself to smile back. "*Thanks*! Mom took me to get my hair done."

Moving in close to Josh, Tracy looked him up and down. "Nice outfit! Shoulda worn tennis shoes, though!"

Giggling at the coincidence and looking up at his mother who just rolled her eyes, Josh looked back at Tracy. "Thanks, Trace. *Mom* made me change outta mine when we went out!"

"*Moms*!" Tracy laughed before she turned to Melanie. "No *offense*, Ms. Ryan!"

Sighing and seeing that Tracy seemed utterly sincere in her acceptance of Jocelyn, Melanie smiled. "It's *fine*, Tracy! Would you two like a snack?"

"I just had one, Ms. Ryan." Tracy declined.

"Not hungry either, Mom." Josh refused. "Can I show Trace my room?"

Still concerned that Tracy might just be putting up an act, only to turn on Josh as soon as her back was turned, Melanie shook her head. "I don't know if that's such a good idea just *yet*, Jocelyn. She hurt you very badly."

"It's mostly *my* fault, Mom." Josh tried to take some of the heat. "I just sorta dumped it all on her at once and didn't think how it would make *her* feel, then just expected she would be *happy* about it. That wasn't fair. This is a pretty big change, and Trace is still just a kid like me!"

Sighing, she nodded in resignation. "*Alright*, but I want the door left open and Tracy?" she turned to the girl. "I want you to *promise* me that you won't do anything to hurt Jocelyn's feelings or make her feel guilty for just being *herself*!"

Looking at Melanie directly in the eye, Tracy had no problems saying what she really felt. "Ms. Ryan? I *promise* you that *all* I see in her is my sister *Jocelyn*, and all I want is for her to be my best friend again. I *never* want her to go back to being... being that *other* person she *pretended* to be. *Honest!* I *swear!*"

Seeing the truth of it in the girl's eyes, and hearing the way she put it, Melanie's suspicions were at last put to rest. "I *believe* you, Tracy! Go on then, and let this be a lesson to you *both*! Never try to *force* someone to be something they aren't! We *all* have to love one another for *themselves*, not for what *we* expect them to be!"

Nearly gagging on the hypocrisy she was showing, all Josh wanted was to get away from her. "Can we *go* now, Mom?" he asked impatiently.

Seeing a nod from her, the two ran up the stairs as fast as their legs could carry them. Entering Josh's room, he only closed the door partially to help muffle their voices, leaving less than an inch open.

Letting out a breath, Josh turned to Tracy and saw her sitting on his bed smiling.

"Told you!" Tracy said happily.

"Told me *what?*" Josh retorted.

"That you'd like being a girl!"

"I wouldn't go *that* far!" he stated with a snort as he crossed the room and sat next to her.

"Well, you *look* happy!"

"Looks can be *deceiving*." he pointed out. "Still, it's not *totally* horrible! At least this way, Daddy and Mom are off my case! I just don't see any *choice*. They kinda backed me into a corner... a very *pink* corner." he said as he looked around the room.

"Maybe it's for the best. You were *always* pretty girly anyway. Now people will just see you as a normal girl instead of a weird boy."

"A normal girl who's a lesbian in a boy's body that wishes she was a boy!" he sighed. "I must be *crazy!*"

"If you are, you're in good company!" Tracy smiled. "You really *do* look cute in that outfit! Did you pick it out or your mom?"

"*I* did." he admitted. "I was trying to go for something not *too* girly, which, given my choices, is a pretty limited selection."

"Well, no *boy* I know could pick out an outfit that well coordinated. I *love* the earrings! You gonna get your ears pierced next year? *I* am!"

"Not if I can *help* it!" he balked. "I draw the line at permanent body modification!"

"You think the 'rents will try and push *hormones* on you?"

"Probably, but I'm holding on *that* argument until I can figure a way to win it. I already lost the battle of the name without a shot fired. By this time next month, I'll officially be Jocelyn Viola Ryan."

"I thought you said you were trying to *like* being a girl?"

"I *am*!" he stated, standing up and pacing the room. "I'd just like a little *choice* in it, is all!"

After Tracy left later that evening, having spent the afternoon talking about clothes and school, Josh finished his missed work and went downstairs for dinner. His parents deciding that he'd go back to school on Monday, it left Josh three days to get used to the idea of showing up to school as a girl. All day Friday he emailed back and forth with his teachers and Tracy. With every email, he could see the lacy noose closing in around his neck, forcing him to be stuck as Jocelyn for the foreseeable future.

Everyone he knew was pleasant, supporting, patient, and damnably unwilling to take a stand against his transition. While he kept telling himself that he could learn to love being who everyone expected him to be, he just couldn't figure out how, and kept secretly hoping that someone, *anyone*, would stand in his way. *Where are all these supposedly intolerant people when you need one?* he grumbled inwardly.

The weekend passed too quickly for Josh. Saturday was a blur of shopping with his mother and Tracy, each trying to suggest to him what outfit looked the best on him, rarely agreeing with each other and never with his ideas of a nice pair of jeans and a T-shirt. Sunday Josh spent with his parents the same way they always did, lounging around the house and watching TV.

He couldn't even remember what they watched as he spent the entire day contemplating how many ways he was going to get beaten up and picked on at school. He only remembered his mother complaining about all the nine-eleven anniversary coverage and how the news wasn't reporting other more important things, like the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. He always tuned out his parents whenever it came to politics though, so he ignored everything after that.

As he lay on his bed, Josh tried to focus only on the good things in his life. *My parents love me. Tracy is still my best friend. All my teachers are totally cool with me showing up as a girl tomorrow. I should be happy. Why can't I just be happy?* Hearing the chime from his phone, he picked it up and read the text message from Tracy.

hey gf. looking forward to tomorrow. it will be fine! you'll see! night!

Smiling a little, Josh sighed and texted her back.

Thanks! I'm a little scared. Glad you'll be there with me! Just wish this was all behind me. Love you! Goodnight.

Once he sent the message, he closed the phone and put it on his nightstand. *At least I won't have to face it alone!* he thought as he closed his eyes.

Chapter 7 - School Daze

Josh could see the group of kids milling about around the bus stop. Coming to a halt, he very nearly chickened out and ran for home. His mother had offered to drive him to school, but he had refused.

"I gotta face 'em sooner or later, Mom." he pointed out as he ate his oatmeal.

"I just don't like the idea of you not being protected, sweetheart!" Melanie almost whined.

"Trace will be there!" he countered. "I'll be fine, Mom. I have to do this!" Not really talking to his mother when he said the last part, it was mostly directed at himself.

"Alright, sweetie." she sighed. "But I want you to call me if anything bad happens, OK?"

Steeling himself, he tugged gently on the denim skirt of his overalls outfit, wishing the skirt were just a little longer. He was wearing thick white tights, so his legs weren't visible, and the white long-sleeve top under the overalls covered him from neck to wrist, but he still felt almost naked. Forging ahead, he listened to the steady sound of his pink and white trainers striking the sidewalk as he closed the distance to the other kids.

Tracy saw him as he approached and ran up to him with a huge smile. *"Hi, Joss! You look great!"* she said as she reversed direction and walked along with him.

"Thanks!" he replied shakily. *"You too!"* Lowering his voice, he almost whispered, *"Did you talk to David?"*

Tracy nodded and sighed. *"Yeah, but he's being a total jerk! He knows better than to pick on you, though. Mom made sure of that, but I wouldn't try to talk*

to him. *Oh*, Mom wanted to know if you were still planning on coming over to my house after school."

Josh nodded as the two approached the five other kids at the stop, one of whom only six days earlier had been his best friend, but now wouldn't even look at him. Pushing aside his feelings, he sighed as he stopped with Tracy beside him while the girl took out her phone and quickly texted her mother.

"OK, I let her know. She can't *wait* to meet you!" Tracy crowed. "When is your dad due back?"

"Wednesday afternoon." Josh answered softly, not wanting to attract too much attention. "He flew out this morning before I was even up. I wish he was here *now*."

"Already missing him?" Tracy asked as she spotted the approaching bus.

"Yeah." Josh said glumly. "He can be just as bad as Mom sometimes, but at least he listens to me *some* of the time!"

The bus pulled to a stop and he and Tracy lined up behind the other kids, David completely ignoring the two the entire time. Stepping on one at a time, Josh was last on and right behind Tracy. Making brief eye contact with the bus driver, he noticed Mary smile at him, so he responded in kind for just a moment before following his only friend down the aisle and into the seat next to her.

Exhaling heavily as he kept his cool, he noticed several of the other kids looking at him funnily, like they were trying to figure out who the new girl was. Smiling back at them, they all seemed to lose interest quickly and turned back to their own friends.

"Well that wasn't *too* bad." he said barely above a whisper.

"Quit worrying!" Tracy said just as softly. "Everything'll be *fine!* *You'll* see!"

While the bus slowly made its way to the school, Josh repeated his internal mantra. *I'm a girl. Everyone says so. I look pretty. I like being a girl. It's just easier this way. Everything will be fine!* Even as he repeated the words in his head, he felt the self-loathing building.

The bus pulled to a stop at the school, Tracy and him joining the line of kids getting off as his heart raced with fear. At last when he stepped out and joined the crowd of kids making their way into the building, he felt Tracy take his hand and give it a squeeze. The two walked hand-in-hand together as they made their way inside. Knowing he had to stop at the office, he pulled away from her and let go of her hand.

"See you in first period!" Tracy said as she headed for her locker.

Entering the office, Josh walked up to the counter and waited for the school secretary to see him.

Mrs. White smiled as she saw the young 'girl' waiting to be seen. "Yes, dear? How may I help you?"

"I'm supposed to see Mr. Tanner." he stated quietly. "I have a note for him from my mother."

Confusedly, the woman looked at her list of meetings for the morning but didn't see a girl's name on it for the Vice-Principal. "I'm very sorry dear, Mr. Tanner is expecting to see a young man about now. I don't see you on his list. You'll have to wait until lunchtime, unless it's an emergency. What is it about?"

As Josh blushed embarrassedly, he was saved from having to explain by Mr. Tanner's voice. "It's alright, Mrs. White." he stated from his office door. "Show Miss Ryan in, please."

Her brows furrowing in further confusion, she looked at the name on her list and saw the last name was the same. "Are you Josh Ryan's *sister*?" she asked as she buzzed the gate open to let Josh in behind the counter.

Shaking his head sadly, he went through and followed the secretary to Mr. Tanner's office without saying a word.

"Thank you, Mrs. White." he said politely. "That will be all."

While the baffled woman returned to her work, Josh took a seat across the desk from the Vice-Principal. "*Here.*" he stated softly. "It's from my mom."

Taking the envelope, he removed the letter, read it briefly, and placed it on his desk. "Do you know what this says, Jocelyn?" he asked. Seeing Josh shake his head slowly, he nodded. "When your parents enrolled you here, we received a letter from Dr. Williams, your psychiatrist. In it he laid out that you were likely transgendered and that we should consider you as such until such time as you told us otherwise. Looking at you now, and having talked with your mother last week, I see that you've made your decision."

Josh's eyes widened. He knew Dr. Williams as a co-worker in his mother's office, but Josh had never seen him as a patient. Slowly he realized that his mother must have convinced the psychiatrist to rubber stamp a letter for her that he was transgendered without even seeing the man. Melanie was going to force him to be a girl no matter what.

"This note that you just handed me is a copy of the filing to change your name with the county probate court. According to policy, we're *supposed* to wait until the court officially changes your name, however I see no need to stand on the letter of district policy here. It's quite obvious that calling you Josh now would not only be *cruel*, but also quite *incorrect*!" he smiled.

"The Principal, Dr. Fredricks, will have a talk with your teachers to explain. They all know your *correct* name already, and have been instructed to treat

you as a girl at all times. I'm telling you this because I want you to feel that she and I are on your side, here. Any questions?"

Feeling helpless and overwhelmed, Josh just shook his head.

"Well then!" he smiled. "Let's get you to class before you're tardy!"

Walking with Josh, he handed the secretary the letter and instructed her to go ahead and change all of Josh's school records over to his new name. As Josh was walking out the door with him, the boy looked back at Mrs. White who stared back in shock, not able to believe that he was in fact, Josh Ryan.

While the two walked toward Josh's locker, Mr. Tanner explained a few of the differences now that he was going to school as a girl. "You can't use the boys' rooms any more, Jocelyn. However, you might not want to use the girls' bathrooms *either*. This school has four special needs bathrooms. Do you know where they are?"

Nodding, Josh gulped. "I... I have to use the *handicapped* bathrooms?"

"*Special Needs*." he corrected Josh. "We don't use that term here."

"Yes, sir." Josh replied.

Approaching his locker, the man continued. "You should use either the coach's office to change for PE or the special needs bathroom in the gym. You'll be following the school curriculum for girl's PE, but you can't use the girls' locker room. It's not *safe*. As far as this school is concerned, you are a girl. If you use the girls' restrooms or locker room though, you might be harassed or bullied and we don't want that."

Josh opened his locker only to have a note fall out and onto the floor. Just as he was about to pick it up, Mr. Tanner got to it first. "Is this *yours*?" he asked curiously.

"Um... yes!" he stated as he took the note and stuffed it in his pack. Getting the things he needed for the first half of the day, Josh closed the locker and followed the man toward his first period class, just as the bell rang indicating three minutes until class began.

"What's your first class?" he asked Josh.

"Home Ec." he answered as they made their way.

"The class is called *Family & Consumer Sciences*, Jocelyn." he corrected Josh as he subtly changed direction toward the right hallway.

Walking the rest of the way in silence, Josh noticed Brenda looking at him as she went in the Home Economics room down the hall ahead of him.

"I think I'm *fine* from here, Mr. Tanner." Josh sighed. "You can't guard me every period!"

Nodding at him and smiling, he silently watched Josh walk in the classroom before turning back toward the office.

As soon as Josh entered the room, all talking stopped as more than two dozen girls stared at him in wide-eyed awe. Making his way to his desk, he sat gracefully and glanced over at Tracy to his left, happy to see her genuine smile. Glancing around nervously, he spotted Brenda just behind him on the right. She was looking at him with a confused expression, as though trying to reconcile the idea of Josh in a skirt with the reality.

When the bell rang starting class, Josh just tried his best to focus on his work and the lesson of the day; Introduction to Nutrients. When the class neared the end and Josh found himself with nothing else to do, he reached into his pack and retrieved the note that had fallen from his locker.

Opening it, he puzzled over it for a few minutes before putting it back.

At last the bell rang ending class and the girls all got up to go to their second period classes. Josh hung back with Tracy and watched as Brenda left the room, stealing glances at him at every opportunity.

"I got a weird note in my locker." Josh explained as he walked with Tracy.

"What did it say?"

"It was just some expressions, some from the *Bible*, I think." he answered.

"Let me guess, all stuff about burning in *hell* or something?" Tracy sneered.

"No." Josh explained. "That's the *weird* part. They were all about love, not passing judgement, and other *nice* stuff! Some I never *heard* of!"

"Huh." Tracy puzzled. "Did they *sign* it?"

"No, but I know it was from a girl." he answered as they turned a corner.

"Boys, I mean other than ones like me, don't write that nice."

The two went their own ways, Josh walking for the first time alone through the halls. He saw Reggie spot him from a long way off. *Oh no!* he groaned to himself. Quickly increasing his pace, he made it to the gym before Reggie could get near him. PE was just like it had been the previous Tuesday, the only difference being his gym outfit, which consisted of the girl's shorts and top instead of the boy's gear.

Going on to choir, Josh noticed the girls in his section looking him over. Blushing, he just tried to ignore their stares. By the time he got to his history class, he wasn't even paying attention to the stares, whispers, or thinly veiled tittering from the kids around him. Sitting next to Tracy, he was glad to see her smile. Returning it, he glanced over at Brenda who seemed to be ignoring him. Going through the motions, he found it difficult to focus on his work, oftentimes finding himself daydreaming, pretending he was just another boy.

When the bell rang for lunch, he walked with Tracy to their lockers, only to see David there ahead of them.

"You go on ahead, Trace." he offered. "I... I'll wait until he leaves."

"*No, Joss!*" she insisted. "You have every right to go to your own *locker!*" Taking his hand, Tracy nearly had to pull him along.

Walking up to the lockers, Josh glanced over at David, who had his back turned. Putting in his combination, Josh opened the locker and put away his pack and retrieved his lunch while Tracy did the same. None of them spoke. Before Josh was done, David slammed his locker closed and walked off in silence.

"*Jerk!*" Tracy said as she closed her own locker. "He's just butt-hurt 'cause you're a girl and he *hates* most girls!"

Josh gently pushed his locker closed and joined Tracy in walking toward the cafeteria. "It's not like I *chose* this!" he grumbled. "Oh, and you'll *love* this latest news. Mom got Dr. Williams at her office to sign off on me, sight-unseen. So now I *really* have no choice!"

"I thought you were learning to *like* it?" she asked confusedly.

"I'm *trying* to." he admitted. "I just don't like being *railroaded* into it! I wish things could just go back to the way they were *before*. Everyone just keeps *staring* at me and whispering behind my back!"

"They're just jealous 'cause you're so pretty!" Tracy tried to cheer him up, not realizing it had the opposite effect.

Taking their seats in the lunch area, they passed the time in silence while no one else sat near them. Finally, as they were almost done, Josh looked around at the empty seats at their table. "You keep hanging around me and

you'll ruin your social standing, Trace. You'll be as big a social outcast as *me!*"

"I don't care!" Tracy said with a huff. "You're my *sister* and best friend... and BFFs don't *abandon* each other!"

His last few classes were just a repeat of the first four. Nobody talked to him, everybody stared, and nothing bad happened. When at last it came time to go home, he met Tracy at their lockers just as David was leaving.

"*Fine!* Tell the *freak* I hope she enjoys being the laughing stock of the whole school! Just keep *it* away from my room!" David snapped at his sister as he stormed off.

"*Ooo!* That complete..." Tracy began as she turned around and saw Josh. "*Joss!* You heard that... *didn't* you?"

Nodding, he opened his locker and collected his things. "It's fine. I won't bother him. I just wanna get on with life and hope everything settles down."

Walking toward the front of the building together, Josh noticed a girl in the courtyard standing and looking at him. While he'd gotten used to being stared at, he noticed she wasn't staring, just watching him. When she noticed him looking back at her, she suddenly looked embarrassed and turned away.

"*Trace?* See the girl by the tree? The one in the long black skirt?"

Looking where he'd indicated, she nodded. "Yeah. What about her?"

"Who *is* she?" he asked. "She was looking at me. *Watching* me."

"That's Jennifer Healy. She's in my math class and went to my Intermediate school. I thought you said *everyone* was staring today?"

"She was *different*, though." he said as they walked toward their bus. "She wasn't *staring*... just... kinda *watching*... and when she saw I was looking back, she looked away."

"Weird." Tracy noted.

Climbing on the bus, they saw only one seat still completely free. Taking it quickly, the two chatted together until they reached their stop. When Josh stood up to get off, he found himself face to face with David trying to do the same. Unable to get out of his way, and seeing the look of anger in the boy's eyes, Josh turned and quickly walked off the bus, hearing David right on his heels as he fought to keep from crying at the loss of one of his oldest friends.

Stepping clear of the door and jogging the opposite direction from Tracy's house, Josh stopped after he was behind the bus and only then turned to see David stalking his way home. Sniffing back the tears, he watched Tracy walk up to him.

"*Joss!* Are you OK?"

"*No!*" he answered, wiping a tear away just as it escaped his right eye. "He *hates* me! David *hates* me! And now I'm supposed to go over to your place until Mom gets home from work!"

"Come on." Tracy said, taking his hand again and smiling. "Let's go. Mom is *dying* to see you!"

Walking the short distance to Tracy's house, they could see David ahead of them, the boy storming into the Edwards house while they were still a few houses away. Slowly wandering up, the two finally reached Tracy's front door and went in.

"*Mom!*" Tracy yelled. "We're *here!*"

Joyce Edwards walked into the entryway from the hall leading off to the bedrooms where Tracy and David had their rooms. Seeing 'Jocelyn' for the first time, she stopped and looked at him from head to toe with a stunned expression. Finally shaking herself free of the spell, Joyce smiled at him warmly. "It's very nice to finally meet you, Jocelyn!" she said happily. "I must say, I don't know why I didn't see it sooner. You're *lovely!*"

Feeling the sting of the compliment after his near confrontation with David, Josh pushed the feelings away and smiled. "Thank you, Mrs. Edwards." he said shyly. Looking up at the woman with her curly red hair from a bottle and fair complexion, he tried to look the woman in her bright green eyes.

"Mrs. *Edwards?*" she replied. "Sweetie, you've been calling me Aunt Joyce for *years!* No reason to stop now!" As she talked, she approached the two, finally standing in front of the child she'd known since age three. Taking him in a hug, she stepped back and turned to walk in the kitchen. "You two want a snack? I'm making one for David who's exiled himself to his *room!*"

"*Thanks, Mom!*" Tracy said as she led Josh through the kitchen and into the dining room. "We'll be in here doing homework!"

After fixing them a few finger sandwiches, and delivering a plate to David's room, she brought them their snack and sat at the dining room table with the two apparent girls. Seeing a moment when the two took a break from their assignments, she took the opportunity to talk.

"*Jocelyn?* I want to apologize for David's behavior." she stated seriously. "You don't *deserve* it. He's being very petty!"

"*That's* OK, Aunt Joyce." he answered, finishing his bite. "I understand. Dave doesn't *have* to like me. I'm different than I used to be."

Watching him closely, Joyce shook her head. "*No...* not *really.* Other than the clothes, which you look *very* nice in by the way, you're still the same

wonderful... *girl*... that you've always been!" her pause a very obvious near pronoun slip that she'd managed to avoid.

Josh smiled when she nearly called him a boy, only cementing further into Joyce's mind that he was still a happy child and was just being grateful to her for calling him a girl.

"May I ask you something?" Joyce asked delicately. "If you'd rather not talk about it, just let me know, but I was wondering... when did you *know*?"

"Know *what*?" Josh asked innocently.

"Well... that you were... a *girl*." she stated plainly.

Unsure how to answer, Josh tried to find a way of putting it that wasn't an outright lie. "Well, to be honest I'm not really sure. I'm just me and I've always just *been* me. It's not like I woke up one day and suddenly went, 'Oh. I'm a *girl*.' or anything."

"Huh." she pondered his answer. "But when did you know you were... well... *different*... from other boys?"

"Oh, I've *always* known *that*!" he said with an honest grin, happy that she'd essentially just called him a boy. "I think the first time I really felt different was in Kindergarten. Until then, the only boy I really knew well was... um... was *Dave*." he finished with a note of sadness as he took another bite of sandwich.

Sighing heavily, Joyce just looked at Josh for a moment. "*Thank* you." she said finally.

"For *what*?" he asked curiously.

"For being *you*!" she said with a smile.

Letting the two get back to their assignments, the afternoon passed quickly. Once done, they went into Tracy's room and played as they always had, taking turns picking what board games to play as they simply enjoyed each other's company. When Melanie arrived to take him home, she was pleased to see them getting along just as they always had, watching them play for a few minutes without either of them noticing her or Joyce's presence.

"OK, girls!" Joyce said at last. "Time for Jocelyn to head home!"

Looking up and seeing his mother there, he was suddenly brought back to reality. The whole time he'd been playing with Tracy, he'd forgotten he was supposed to be a girl. Even Tracy's new nickname for him was so close to his old name that he hardly heard the difference.

For her part, Melanie took his abrupt mood shift to be simple disappointment that he had to stop playing with Tracy, never knowing the real reason he suddenly looked so sad.

The rest of the evening proceeding uneventfully, Josh went to bed and closed his eyes, hoping against hope that he would wake up and find it had all been a bad dream and he would find himself still at summer camp.

When his alarm woke him to the same reality he'd fallen asleep to, he nearly cried in frustration. Taking a shower and getting dressed, this time in a pair of black slacks and a simple white blouse, he still made sure to style his hair correctly and picked out some simple rhinestone earrings. Looking himself over, and seeing nothing but a girl in the mirror, he found himself almost angry with his impossible situation.

Going through the motions, he went to school and tried to focus, but found school much less fun than he used to. Hardly paying attention, he was in a fog most of the time, continually thinking about how much better things would be if he could just be a boy again. No one harassed him all day, and going home to Tracy's house was thankfully free of run-ins with David.

Once more he forgot he had to be a girl as he played with Tracy before his mother came to collect him.

Depression settling in as he got ready for bed again, he wondered how long he could keep it up. As he lay down in his canopy bed, he began to worry when his parents would try to put him on hormone blockers, making sleep very restless that night as he had nightmares of growing breasts the size of basketballs. Getting up in a grumpy mood, he almost stomped into the bathroom to get clean.

Going back into his room, he forced himself to stop and look at himself in the mirror with nothing on except a towel.

I'm a girl. he sighed as he looked at his body. *It's so not fair! What boy looks like I do?* He sighed as he opened his closet, looking for something to wear for the warmer weather expected. Opting for a light knee-length floral skirt and a poet blouse with lace around the neckline, he brushed out his hair and put on a pair of white pearl stud earrings. Looking himself over, he sighed as his heart filled with self-loathing and anger at the world for ending up in such a horrible state.

Unlike David, he didn't have anything against girls. He quite liked them, in fact. More than just as girlfriend material, they made better friends, were nicer, and he could relate to them better. *Everything about me says I'm a girl.* he pondered as he looked himself over and judged himself quite pretty. *I think like a girl, I talk like a girl, I write like a girl, I laugh like a girl, I cry like a girl, I throw and run like a girl... So why do I hate being one? It just doesn't make any sense!*

Reaching the bus stop, he saw to his horror that Tracy wasn't there, but David was. Walking up to the assembled kids, he waited alone for a few minutes and kept watching down the street to see if she was coming, but saw nothing of his sole friend and ally. Pulling out his phone, he texted her quickly.

Trace? Where are you? The bus will be here soon!

It only took a moment for the reply to come.

*i have a stupid cold! sry! begged mom to go anyway, but she said no way.
let me know if you need me. luv u sis! xxx*

Gulping in fear, he realized this would be his first full day of possibly many ahead where he would be totally and completely alone.

Chapter 8 - Altercations

Petrified as he saw the bus coming, Josh knew it was too late to get a ride from his mother as she'd already gone to work. Getting a ride with his father, which wasn't an option as he was not due back until that afternoon, would have been more humiliating than getting on the bus in a dress. He honestly respected his parents and their right to express their opinions, but he'd gotten enough of a hard time in Primary and Intermediate school when his classmates would see the rolling campaign ad for the Democrat Party. Not because of their politics, but simply because it looked so tacky.

When the bus pulled to a stop next to him, he queued up at the back of the line and waited for everyone else to get on. As he climbed aboard, the driver noted Tracy's absence.

"*Jocelyn?*" Mary asked delicately, "Where's *Tracy?*"

"She's home sick with a cold, Miss Cartwright." he answered shyly. Looking at the seats, he found one that was empty near the front and sat down, not wanting to make eye contact with any of his classmates without Tracy there to support him.

The bus ride was excruciatingly long, seeming to drag on for hours over the thirty minutes it took to reach the school. Several times he saw kids just about to sit with him, only to suddenly change their minds and move to another seat when they saw who was sitting there. When at last they arrived at the school, he was up almost before they stopped and got a minor look of disapproval from Mary. Looking down embarrassedly, he waited for the doors to open, then practically ran into the building.

Making his way to his locker, he opened it to find another note on the same style paper as before. Glancing at it briefly, it was similarly written out with expressions of peace, brotherhood, hope, and kindness. Reading it nearly made him cry just at the sentiment. He didn't know where most of the quotes

were from, sure they were from the Bible, but a few he recognized from his History book as being made by Martin Luther King and Abraham Lincoln. Putting it in his pack, he had a smile on his face as he put things away in the locker and closed it. As the door swung shut, he saw David at his own locker, the two locking eyes a moment before Josh quickly turned away and went the opposite direction, even though he needed to go past David to get to class.

Milling about in the courtyard, he sat down while David seemed to take his time. Waiting, he saw Jennifer Healy once more looking over at him as she walked to class when she thought he couldn't see her. Wondering what her deal was, fully expecting her to be someone like Jason who had a grudge against him, he sighed and waited until David finally left and started toward his first class.

Entering the Home Ec room, Josh took his seat and got out the homework from the night before. He wasn't happy with the quality of his work, and felt guilty that Tracy had helped him far more than he'd helped her. Still, he forced himself to shove the feelings aside and re-double his efforts to stay focused in class and keep up. Finding himself daydreaming far too much, by lunchtime was feeling very isolated, scared, distracted, and depressed.

Sitting in the lunchroom and eating alone, he sighed sadly and barely kept the tears at bay. Everyone else there had someone to spend lunch with, but he was now a complete outcast. Picking at his food, he was nearly startled to death when he heard the voice behind him.

"What? No *dykes* to hang with the *freak* anymore?"

Closing his eyes, he felt the true terror of loneliness when it mattered most; when you were being threatened. "Tracy's not a *dyke*, Reggie." he spat. "She likes *boys*."

Sitting next to Josh, Reggie sneered at him. "Well, I guess that's why she sits with *you*, huh? The *dude* in the *dress*!"

"Leave me *alone*, Reggie!" he said slightly louder, but still barely audible more than a few feet away.

"Or *what*?" he challenged. "It's a free country! I can sit here if I like! I think I'll sit next to you *every* lunch! Whadaya got, anyway?" he asked just as he snatched Josh's lunch bag.

"Give that back!" Josh said more sternly.

"In a minute!" Reggie replied. "I just wanna see what a lady-boy like you has for lunch! Probably tofu and soy yogurt! Heh! Heh! Heh! *Oh*! Look! You have *cookies*? Aren't you afraid they'll ruin your girlish figure? How'll you turn *tricks* at night if you become a fat *cow*? I better take these... for your own good, of course!"

"Knock it off, Reggie." came a familiar voice from behind the bully.

Turning to see David standing behind him, Reggie chuckled. "Well, well, well! Come to have *your* share, fag? Here, you can have the rest of *its* lunch. Just a dumb bologna sandwich, though."

"Give it *back* to her, Reggie..." David growled as he clenched his fists, "...or else!"

"Or else *what*, fruitcake?" he said as he stood up and flexed in front of the smaller boy. "Gonna *make* me, faggot?" he tried to push David away.

Smacking the bully's hand away, David made the boy yelp in surprise. "Don't *touch* me!" he warned him.

Infuriated that David wasn't intimidated, Reggie hauled back his fist and, much faster than anyone could have expected, landed it squarely across David's jaw, sending the smaller boy flying over the table with a loud crash.

A grin spreading across his face at having laid out Josh's protector with one punch, he suddenly realized he'd be in big trouble if he were caught. Turning to run just as Josh leapt from the table to run to David's prone form, Reggie slammed right into the approaching body of Mr. Tanner, who grabbed him to prevent his escape.

"*Hey! Lemme go!*" Reggie screamed. "You can't *touch* me! My parents will sue your ass into *oblivion!* Let me *go!*"

Waiting for a school security officer to show up, he calmly restrained Reggie while Josh helped David sit up. "Is the boy alright?" he asked.

Josh looked at David and saw the blood seeping from his mouth. "Oh, *David!* You should have just let him do what he wanted! It was just *lunch!* I wasn't hungry *anyway!* You're *bleeding!*"

Shaking his head to clear it, David looked at Josh like he'd lost his mind. "Of *courff* I'm bleeding! He knocked a *tooff* out!" he hissed as he looked around before spotting his wayward dentition under the next table. "*Vere* it ish." he said pointing at it, causing a boy at the table to crawl under to retrieve it.

Getting back to his feet with Josh's help, he glared at Reggie with a look of raw hatred and fury. Trying to climb over the table to get at his attacker, Josh wouldn't let him.

"Let me *go*, Joff!" he demanded. "I'm gonna *kill* that fon of a bitch!"

The Vice-Principal released Reggie as the security officer put handcuffs on him and turned to the furious boy. "*David?* You need to calm down! I know you're angry, but I'm not going to let you continue the fight!" Looking at Josh, he nodded. "Are *you* alright, Jocelyn?"

Nodding as he continued to try and restrain his ex-best friend, he was helped when a teacher showed up and grabbed hold of David's left arm.

"You two come with me." Mr. Tanner said calmly. "We'll need you to write a statement about what happened. *OK, Jocelyn?*" Seeing Josh nod as he was obviously near to tears, the man sighed and started walking with the security officer and a restrained Reggie toward the office.

The teacher started to make David come along when the boy jerked his arm free. "I can walk on my *own!*" he insisted as he started toward the office, the teacher following close behind to ensure he didn't try to run after Reggie.

Just as Josh was about to follow, he stopped and turned to the boy who'd picked up David's tooth. Grabbing a paper napkin, he held it out to the boy. "*Here. Let me have that, please?*"

The boy looked at Josh confusedly for a moment before he hesitantly put the tooth in the offered napkin. "Sure."

Wrapping it up, Josh quickly followed the teacher escorting David.

Jennifer watched as he hurried his way across the lunchroom, holding the edge of his skirt as he ran; an ever so slight smile on the girl's face.

Henry Edwards walked into the office at the same time Fred Ryan did, both having been called to the school for their children's involvement in a fight.

Seeing Josh standing in the nurse's station, Fred thought the worst and leapt over the counter to run in. "*Jocelyn!*" he cried out.

Turning to see his father running toward him, he moved out of the nurse's office just in time to be enveloped in his father's arms. "I'm *fine*, Daddy! It's *Dave!* That Neanderthal *Reggie*... the boy that threatened me on the first day? He punched Dave and knocked out one of his *teeth!*"

Making his way over, having waited for the secretary to buzz him in, Mr. Edwards approached the two.

"*Hank!*" Fred said as he released Josh.

Slowing briefly as he nodded to Josh's father, he entered the nurse's office to check on his son. Coming out a few minutes later, while Josh told Fred what happened, Hank sighed heavily and walked over to the two. "Sorry. I needed to make sure he was OK. How's *J... Jocelyn?*"

"She's *fine!*" Fred said with a relieved sigh. "David was protecting Jocelyn from that *Hughes* boy and got caught by a right cross. I owe your son a debt of gratitude, Hank. He saved my little girl!"

Grimacing, he looked down at the small boy in the blouse and skirt. "I'm glad you're OK, Jocelyn." he said with a sigh. Looking up, he saw trouble coming. "*Uh oh.*" Nodding toward the front of the office, the three looked over to see a heavysset man in a business suit, red in the face with anger.

"I want to see that Vice-Principal *now!*" demanded George Hughes. "If I don't get some *action* soon, I'll own the whole *lot* of you! *Where! Is! That! Man!*" he yelled, punctuating his last four words with beats on the counter loud enough to rattle the windows.

"Mrs. White?" Mr. Tanner stated from his office door. "Would you please show Mr. Hughes, Mr. Ryan, Mr. Edwards, Jocelyn, and David, if he's up to it, into my office, please?"

Buzzing George Hughes in, she barely kept pace with him as he charged forward toward the Vice-Principal's office. Fred held Jocelyn back until the large man passed them and only then followed him into the room, while Hank checked to see if David was up to joining the conversation.

"How *dare* you call in the middle of a workday to tell me you're suspending my son... *again...* and that you've called the police!" George barked. "I'll have you know my law office is one of the biggest in the area and my time is valued at over five hundred dollars an hour!"

"*Good.*" Mr. Tanner stated. "You're going to *need* a lawyer, Mr. Hughes. Won't you sit down?"

"I don't have *time* to sit, you pompous *cream puff!*" he yelled. "I just came down to warn you that if you suspend my son and cause me to miss more work, I'm gonna *sue* the school district, and you *personally*, for lost wages!"

"*Mr. Hughes!*" the administrator barked. "Your son is currently under arrest and on his way to Juvenile Detention for assault and battery against a student of this school, as well as for theft, threats, and harassment of *another* student! *Sit! Down!*"

Finally cowed, the large man lowered himself into a chair in front of the Vice-Principal. "So what happened? They get in a tumble and you blow a *gasket*? Boys will be boys! You have to allow 'em a *little* leniency to blow off steam! I'm sure the *other* boy got in *his* licks! Is *he* under arrest?"

"My son didn't *hit* yours, Mr. Hughes." Hank spat from the doorway where he stood with David, who was holding an ice pack over his swollen cheek. "He was standing up for his friend and your son *sucker-punched* him!"

Turning his bulk in the seat to see who it was that was speaking to him, George Hughes eyed the man and then looked at David. He then swept his gaze over Fred and Josh. "*So?* Reggie was hitting on your son's girlfriend and your little brat couldn't take the competition, huh? *Ha!*"

"Mr. Hughes!" Fred barked. "Your son *stole* my daughter's lunch, threatened her *physically*, and is the same girl that he was suspended last Tuesday for threatening with bodily harm! That makes it criminal harassment! David, in full view of dozens of witnesses, tried to make him stop, and your son *punched* him without provocation!"

Confused, he looked at Josh and then at Fred. "*No!* That *can't* be right! Reginald was suspended for *allegedly* threatening some gay boy named

Joshua! Not a girl! Friggin' *pansies!* I actually *read* the suspension form! Think I'm *stupid* or something?"

"The name on the form was incorrect, Mr. Hughes." Mr. Tanner explained. "Ms. Ryan there *is* the person your son threatened and was suspended for three days for harassing."

"So then I'll sue the district for suspending my son on false accusations; for threatening a boy that doesn't even *exist!* You people are all *idiots!*"

Looking at Josh expectantly, Mr. Tanner asked the child wordlessly for permission to 'out' him.

Shaking his head in fear, Josh looked up at his father for help, only to see Fred looking down at him hoping he would be brave enough to see justice done. Lastly, Josh looked over at Hank and David, hoping one of them would take his side, but both looked away, meaning it was up to him.

Taking a breath, he stepped away from his father and walked over to the desk to stand by Mr. Hughes. Shaking with fear, he stiffened and raised his chin. "*Sir?* Last week, my name *was* Joshua Ryan. Now it's *Jocelyn.*"

Looking at Josh up and down, he saw what appeared to him to be a totally normal, if pretty, twelve-year-old girl. Dismissing the suggestion with a huff, he smiled at the ridiculousness of the idea. "Huh! *Please!* Do I *look* like I fell off the turnip truck yesterday? You're a *girl!*"

"Nevertheless," Mr. Tanner explained, "last week *his* name was Joshua Ryan, and now *her* name is *Jocelyn* Ryan."

Turning ashen as he looked at the scared child unbelieving, then over at Fred who simply nodded, he turned back to Josh with a look of horror. "You mean that... *thing...* is a *boy?*"

"No, Mr. Hughes." Fred explained. "We mean to say that Jocelyn was *mistaken* for being a boy at birth, but now we know better."

Knowing he was on a legally unhelpful topic, he dismissed it. "*Irrelevant!* The issue is Reginald being handed over to the cops like a common *criminal!* Do you *know* what this will do to my firm's reputation? I want the charges dropped or I'll sue *all* of you for damages in the tens of millions!"

Hank stepped forward. "Oh, I doubt your firm will be willing to have its name dragged through the mud in costly litigation with ties to *hate crimes*, Mr. Hughes! You see, my son, the boy your son assaulted, is *gay*. I think on balance, since I know you're only a *junior* partner in the firm, they're more likely to distance themselves from *you* before any *damage* can be done."

David smiled at his father's defense of him. "Yeah, they'll just *fire* your ass!"

"That's quite *enough*, David." Mr. Tanner said, holding up his hands.

Flustered to near apoplexy, Mr. Hughes looked at the two men standing near the door, then Josh standing next to him, and lastly to the Vice-Principal. "Damn leftist pinko-*commies!*"

"I think you'll find, Mr. Hughes," Hank said with a smile, "I'm a member of the Ohio chapter of Conservatives Against Discrimination and the Cleveland chapter of the Log Cabin Republicans!" Looking over at Fred Ryan, whose face had turned pale at the revelation, Hank smiled. "*Him* you can call a leftist! I don't know about Vice-Principal Tanner."

The administrator sat back in his chair and regarded the large man sitting in front of him. "*So* Mr. Hughes, if you are quite through making *threats*, I have a form for you to sign which will result in your son being expelled from this school for repeated acts of violence, threats against student safety, and harassment of protected minorities. If you fail to sign, the district will begin legal proceedings to have him removed by court order. Please just sign on

the indicated line and you'll be free to go to Juvenile Detention to sort out your family problems on your *own*."

Taking the pen and signing the form, George looked ready to explode. "At least this will keep his name out of the *courts*!"

Just as the Vice-Principal took the form, Hank shook his head. "I'm afraid *not*, sir. I intend to press charges. Your son is a *bully* and attacked my boy. I'll do whatever it takes to see to it David and little Miss Ryan there remain safe from his anti-social behavior by putting your son in *jail*!"

Growling as he stood up, George Hughes stormed out the door without saying another word.

As the five remaining people stood in the room regarding one another, Fred looked over at David and nodded in gratitude. "Thank you for protecting my Jocelyn, David." Seeing the boy look down embarrassedly, he turned to Hank. "And thank *you* for not letting that Reggie boy get *away* with it!"

"I'm sure you'd have done the same for me if our positions had been reversed, Fred." he stated, hoping it was true.

"As for the rest of the issues..." Mr. Tanner continued. "Mr. Edwards? The district has a 'no tolerance' policy on fighting that states anyone involved in a fight on school grounds *must* be suspended for three days at a minimum."

Josh's eyes went wide. "You can't *do* that, Mr. Tanner! Dave didn't *do* anything except stand up for me and get hit! It's not *fair*!"

"Jocelyn, *please*. Settle down." Fred tried to ease his son's ire. Walking up and putting his hands on Josh's shoulders protectively, he looked at the Vice-Principal with a pleading expression. "Mr. Tanner, surely you have *some* degree of leniency due to special circumstances! David didn't do anything wrong! In point of fact, he did everything *right*!"

David walked up to the desk still holding the ice pack on his cheek. "I'll understand if there's nothing you can do, sir. I knew what I was doing."

Grimacing, Mr. Tanner nodded. "In answer to your question Mr. Ryan, yes I have the authority, in special circumstances, to mitigate the standard policy. The issue though is that young Mr. Edwards was already on probation for cyberbullying. He sent a *very* slanderous email to Miss Ryan last Wednesday that was forwarded to my office. While I *can* mitigate the punishment for the fight, I *cannot* mitigate the three-day suspension for violating his probation. The district policy simply does not allow less than that. I'm sorry, son."

Looking in surprise at his father, Josh stepped back and away from him. "You turned in the email Dave sent me? *Daddy!* How *could* you!"

"I *had* to, princess!" he defended his actions. "At the time, he seemed to be a *threat* to you!"

Glaring at his father, Josh narrowed his eyes in anger. "You *always* mess everything up! You think you know *everything* and what's best for me, but you *don't!* You thought I was gay for seven *years*, Daddy... and you were *wrong!* I don't even *like* boys! And now you... you..." Overcome, Josh broke down and cried, never able to get to the part where he would tell his father that he wasn't a girl and he'd been wrong again.

Everyone assumed Josh's breakdown was in response to David's suspension and he was only angry with Fred because he'd turned the email in. Looking at one another as Josh dropped to his knees, each of the three wondered what they could do to console the 'girl' openly bawling in the office, but none felt in a position to do so. Fred was the target of his anger, while Hank and Mr. Tanner both felt it inappropriate to comfort a 'girl' not their own.

David solved the problem by going over to Josh and helping him up off the floor. As soon as he did, Josh latched onto him in a desperate hug.

"Oh, *Dave!*" he cried into the larger boy's shoulder. "It's not *fair!* It's just not *fair!*"

Holding Josh as well and trying to comfort him, David laughed. "Well, at least now I know it wasn't *you* who got me in trouble, Joff. I'm sorry I was such a *jerk* to you!"

Without thinking, Josh lifted his head and kissed him on the cheek. Instantly, both boys' eyes shot open and they looked at each other in horror, splitting apart like the same pole of two magnets.

"You *kissed* me!" David complained. "That is *so* disgusting! Kissed by a *girl!* And not just *any* girl, a girl who used to be a pretty awesome *guy!*"

"Oh, that is *so* gross! I kissed a boy, and it was *Dave!* Eww! I kissed *Dave!* That is just *so* wrong!" Josh simultaneously huzzed.

The three men in the room laughed at the sight, eventually all calming down to discuss the matter. While there was nothing that could be done to prevent the three-day suspension for violating his probation, Mr. Tanner agreed that there were extenuating circumstances in that situation as well, so David would be barred from campus, but could still be given his assignments. Josh even agreed to take them home with him from school and drop them off for David to work on over the rest of the week. He also gave David's father the boy's lost tooth.

When the four left the Vice-Principal's office, Fred noted the time. "Looks like you missed all your afternoon classes, princess." he said to Josh.

"I can get a note from Mrs. White excusing it, Daddy. I'll get my makeup work tomorrow. I just wanna go *home!*"

It was then that Fred realized something while Josh was getting a note from the secretary. "*Holy... Um... I just realized! I was coming home from the*

airport in a cab when I got the call! I had the driver bring me here!" Racing out front, he saw that the cab was gone and his bags sat next to the curb.

The other three joined him out front, Hank slapping him on the shoulder. "That's OK, Fred. I'll give you two a ride home!"

Smiling weakly at the father of the boy who had defended his child, Fred sighed. "Thanks, Hank. I *appreciate* it."

As the four rode in the minivan Hank had driven to the school, Fred was dying to know something. "Um... *Hank*? Mind if I ask you something?"

"Go right ahead, Fred!" he said, knowing what the man in the passenger seat was going to ask.

"Were you *serious* with that guy? I mean, about being a conservative and a... a *Republican*?"

"Honest as Abe!" he admitted as he turned a corner with a wide grin.

"But... but *how*? How can you support people who are so... so *cruel* to your son? Isn't that... well... *moronic*?" Fred stammered.

Laughing, Hank just shook his head. "Because I believe in *liberty* and *limited* government, Fred! I believe *everyone*, including my son *and* your daughter, has the right to make their *own* way in the world, to succeed... or *fail*... on their *own* merits and not on the work of *others*. The best way I can see for getting that is to make my party that I *mostly* agree with more accepting by sticking *with* them, not jumping ship for one that I only agree with on one subject. After all, we *all* deserve decent treatment from our neighbors..." He paused and glanced over at Fred who sat in shock at his answer. Smiling, he turned back to the road and added, "...even if they hold the moronic ideas *you* have, Fred!"

Chapter 9 - Unexpected Journeys

After returning home, Josh was truly happy for the first time since the start of school. He had his two best friends again and it actually gave him hope for a moment that, with their help, he could figure a way out of his predicament. *They always helped with my parents insisting I'm gay!* he reasoned. Slowly though, a new thought dawned on him. *I've gone to school three times dressed as a girl! Everyone thinks I want to be one now! It'll be impossible to convince them I really wanna be a boy... even Tracy and David!*

He also realized that not only would he be going to school without Tracy for the next few days, but without David as well. *Even when David was mad at me, he was still there.*

The next morning saw him waiting at the bus stop as usual, the light breeze making the early hour cooler than it had been lately, so he was glad he'd chosen that day to wear his one pair of designer jeans. He almost felt normal, if it weren't for the girl's top and bra he wore that were constant irritations. Getting on the bus, the same story repeated itself as the day before; no one sat with him. Almost trying to hide in plain sight, Josh struggled to ignore the feelings of despair through his classes. Lunchtime saw him again sitting off on his own, but this time no one approached. No confrontations. No drama.

Just quiet loneliness.

He went through his day not really paying attention to much of anything. Riding the bus home was just a repeat of the morning in reverse. Sitting on the bus alone, he was surrounded by kids his age who wanted nothing to do with him. He dropped off David's work at the Edwards' house and said hi to Tracy, but he still felt alone.

Friday morning the weather turned warm again and Josh decided to try and fight his self-loathing by fully embracing the role of being the girl everyone expected him to be.

He pulled out the floral sundress.

Coming downstairs, he felt ridiculous. His closet mirror told him he looked beautiful with the cream-colored cardigan over his shoulders, but every step taken in the off-white two-inch heel sandals told him the truth, over and over.

Boy in a dress.

Swallowing his pride, he smiled at the praise from his mother, tried to enjoy the hug from his father, and re-packed all of his books and things into his new backpack. When he'd gotten home from camp, he'd found his mother had bought him, among other things, a glittery pink backpack. He never thought he'd actually ever use it, but there he was, moving all his things over to the accessory that absolutely screamed 'GIRL!' to anyone looking.

Making his way to the bus stop, he tried to loosen up and just enjoy the fact that he looked pretty and knew it, the way Tracy did, but it continued to eat at him. Sitting on the bus, he tried not to care that the other kids avoided him, but that too slowly gnawed at his heart. Going through his morning classes, he tried to focus on his work and ignore the whispers, but the growing sense of isolation and disgust at his own appearance wouldn't go away. Not even the uplifting note he found in his locker could make a difference.

Eating outside on the grass and enjoying the warm sun, he had a weird feeling come over him; one he couldn't place, just a general sense of unease. Slowly, he turned around to see Jennifer Healy sitting on the grass less than ten feet behind him. He realized then that the odd feeling he'd had was that she'd been looking at him again. Swallowing in fear that it was now her turn to pick on and humiliate him, he looked right in the girl's eyes. This time they were too close to one another to pretend they weren't seeing each other.

"You don't have to be afraid of me." Jennifer said gently.

"What makes you think I am?" he said, trying to keep fear out of his voice.

Smiling, Jennifer shook her head. "I can see it in your eyes. I understand. I'm not going to pick on you."

"Why'd you sneak up behind me, then?" he asked more boldly than he felt.

"I *didn't*," she said with a light giggle. "You sat down in *front* of me!"

"*Oh*," he sighed. "Sorry."

"For what?"

"For thinking you were, like... *stalking* me? Or something?"

Laughing genuinely, she got up and walked down the short, grassy hill to sit next to him. "I'm Jennifer."

"I know. Tracy told me who you were. I'm J... Jocelyn."

"I *know*," she giggled. "I've been *stalking* you, remember!" she said in a sarcastic tone.

Blushing when she smiled at him, he felt a queer feeling in the pit of his stomach, like he'd eaten a sour apple, and couldn't help but look away shyly.

"You're really *pretty*," Jennifer said with her own degree of shyness. "I... I wish *I* was as pretty as you!"

Turning to the girl, he admired her straight pale blonde hair that hung just below her shoulders. She was skinny, almost too skinny, and her angular frame as she sat next to him could only be improved in his opinion by being a little more curvy. *Like me!* he thought glumly. Her skin was free of blemishes and her complexion gave her a pleasant warmth. Her smile when she laughed showed she had slightly large front teeth, but he honestly felt it gave her character, that unique something that made her different from everyone else.

"I think you look pretty." he said, blushing mildly.

"Not as pretty as *you*, though." she sighed as she looked at him wistfully.

"I... can... may I ask you something?"

"You just *did*." he pointed out with a giggle.

Making her laugh, she threw her head back happily. "*No!* I mean... you *know* what I mean!"

Laughing with her, he nodded and smiled. "Go ahead."

Composing herself and turning serious, she looked at him. "I... I wanted to know why you showed up looking like a *boy* the first day of school? You're *way* too pretty to hide it like that!"

Expecting to feel the usual pang of self-loathing when she said he was pretty, he found himself smiling instead. Pushing that confusing feeling aside, he tried to answer her question; not sure if she knew he really was a boy.

"Well... um... I was still... um... you see, I'm... uh..."

"It's OK." she said sweetly. "I didn't mean to make you feel uncomfortable. I just wondered why you weren't dressed nice that day like you have been all week. I woulda thought that you'd be *dying* to get out of boy clothes! Or were you still trying to get your parents to let you?"

"Um... not *exactly*." he explained, realizing she knew he 'used' to be a boy. "I was fighting it. My parents were actually *pushing* me to... to be a girl."

"Well *that's* different!" she giggled. "Usually it's the other way 'round! When did you know you were a girl inside? Did you, like, *always* know?"

Taking a chance at honesty, he gulped and looked away. "To tell you the truth, I *still* don't know. I mean, I *act* like a girl. I *look* like a girl. I *talk* like

a girl. I *laugh* like a girl. In a lot of ways, it's just *easier* to be a girl. My parents think I've just been repressing it because I'm afraid. I guess they're right. I know I don't *look* it, but I feel *silly* in this dress! Like any moment, someone's gonna run up and start *laughing* at me!"

Jennifer nodded. "I guess I understand. I don't know a lot about girls like you, only what I read on the Internet. Gender dis... um... disflor... um..."

"*Dysphoria*." Josh finished for her. "It means 'uncomfortable', basically. I dunno. I was never really *uncomfortable* as a boy. I guess I'd learned to like it. Now I'm trying to get used to liking being a girl."

Cocking her head slightly to the left, she tucked her hair behind her ear. "It almost sounds like you want to go back to being a *boy*!"

Shaking his head, Josh sighed. "I *can't*. I need to just learn to accept that I am what I am. My parents call it 'running away back to being a boy' 'cuz that's where everything was easy and comfortable, like when I was little."

"What do *you* want?" she asked innocently.

Stunned into silence, he turned away from her and toward the school, lost in thought. *What do I want? Nobody ever asks me that!* Smiling, he looked back at her. "I... um... I guess if I had a choice, I'd just be a boy. I guess that makes me a bit of a coward, though. Everyone says I'm *such* a girl! So I'm trying to be brave and just *face* it."

Scrutinizing Josh, she tried to figure him out. Shrugging, she smiled. "OK. If that's what you want to do! *I* like you this way!"

Doing a double take, he stared at her curiously. "You... you *like* me?"

"*Sure!*" she answered happily. "What's *not* to like? You're nice, smart, funny, and... well... *really* pretty!" she finished with a dreamy sigh.

Blushing at the compliments, Josh shied away toward the grass. "I like you, too. You seem to actually *care* what I feel. Plus, you're nice, honest, and... um... pretty, *too!*"

Her turn to blush, she too glanced away shyly. "Thanks! *No* one calls me pretty except my *parents*, though!" Looking up at him, she smiled. "Um... my birthday's the first of next month. Would you like to come?"

"*Sure!*" he said with a smile. Hearing the bell ring, he looked down, realizing he'd never finished lunch. Packing it quickly as the girl stood up and started toward the school building, he looked up when she turned back to him.

"*Oh!* Do you have a nice dress?" Jennifer asked.

Inspecting at the dress he wore, he became self-conscious. "Isn't *this* nice?"

Rolling her eyes, she walked back to him and helped him to his feet. "Not what I *meant*, silly!" she giggled. "I meant like a *party* dress. I want a party that's a little... *nice*... this year. Kinda 'grown up', ya' know? I *am* turning *thirteen*, after all! A girl only becomes a teenager once!"

Thinking quickly as they headed back to the building, Josh bit his lower lip. "I... I'm not sure. I have *some* nice dresses, but I don't really know if any of them would be a *party* dress." Remembering the blue satin dress that Tracy had tried to have him wear, he brightened. "*Oh!* I have the *perfect* dress for something like that! *Yes!* I *do* have a nice dress! It's blue satin with a white belt that ties in back! It's *really* pretty!"

"That sounds *perfect!*" Jennifer looked at him with a wide smile. "I'll bet you look *beautiful* in it! Try not to out-shine me on my own *birthday*, though!"

Giggling together like old friends, they stopped when they got to his locker. When Josh got his pack out, Jennifer asked for a piece of paper. Handing her one from his notebook, he watched as she wrote her number down.

"*Here*. Call me after school? Maybe we can see each other this weekend!"

"*Sure!*" he replied happily, glad to have another friend. Watching her walk away towards her own locker, he sighed lightly, closed his locker, and practically skipped to his math class.

The rest of the day went by uneventfully and quickly as Josh found it easier to concentrate on his work. Even the solitary bus trip home seemed brighter and happier, having seen Jennifer wave to him as she rode home on her bike. Dropping off David's assignments, he knocked gently on Tracy's door.

"Come in." the miserable girl croaked.

"*Hey*, Trace." he said sympathetically. "Feeling *any* better?"

"*No!*" she said with a growl. "Stupid *cold!*"

Stepping into her room, he sat in her desk chair. "Guess what happened to *me* today!" he said happily. "I made a new friend!"

Sitting up at the news, Tracy looked at him with a smile. "Oh? *Who?*"

"Jennifer Healy!" he said with a smile. "We ran into each other at lunch. She's actually really nice!"

Feeling mildly jealous, Tracy grimaced. "That's cool, Joss. You *deserve* it!"

"*Thanks!*" he smiled. "I was feeling *really* lonely with you and Dave not around. You know I never had any friends in my old schools. It was nice to have someone to spend lunch with who doesn't see me as some kind of a *weirdo!*" Seeing his oldest friend look away towards the window sadly, he frowned. "You're still my *best* friend though, Trace! *No one* could ever replace *you!*"

Turning back to him and smiling at the sweet sentiment, she quickly grabbed a tissue and sneezed into it. "*Thanks.*" she said after blowing her nose. "You better go though, Joss. I don't want *you* getting sick!"

Wanting to go over and hug his best friend to comfort her, he reluctantly kept away. "OK, Trace. Just know I *love* you! Hope you get better *soon!*"

"*Thanks, Joss!*" she replied hoarsely. "You look *really* nice today, by the way! I like the cardigan! Can I borrow it when I get better?"

Laughing lightly, Josh smiled and nodded. "Sure thing, Trace! *Heh!* Funny, never thought we'd be borrowing each other's *clothes!*"

Giggling until she started coughing, Tracy nodded in agreement. Once she brought the cough under control, she answered, "You can borrow anything of mine you like! 'Course, it'll all be *huge* on you, skinny witch!" Suddenly an idea sparked in her head. "*Hey!* I bet you can wear the clothes I grew out of last year! *Mom!*" she yelled with her gravelly voice.

A few moments later, Joyce came into the room. "What *is* it, dear?"

"Mom! I had a totally *great* idea! Joss is about the same size I was a year or two ago. I bet she could wear some of the things I outgrew! I like the idea of my *sister* getting some of my old hand-me-downs!"

Skeptically, she looked at Josh and realized that he was in fact just about the size Tracy had been when she was ten and eleven. "I *suppose* so."

"You don't gotta do that, Aunt Joyce!" Josh protested. "I already got enough clothes that I won't need to re-wear anything for three or four weeks!"

"Then you *definitely* need more!" Joyce said with a smile. "Two months at *very* least... just to *start!*" Taking his hand, Josh turning to Tracy for help, the older woman dragged him from the room. "Come on, Jocelyn. Tracy

needs her rest. I'll show you the box of her old things and we can go through them before you head home!"

Sighing in resignation, he went along quietly. "*Bye, Trace! Get better!*"

Tracy waved to him as her mother led Josh down the hall to the door into the garage. Moving a box, she opened one that was three feet square and half filled with clothes. Spending an hour going through the outfits, Josh ended up being glad he'd stayed as he walked home carrying a bag. It was filled with three pairs of designer jeans, six tops that were not very girly, four very plain skirts, and two pairs of leggings still wrapped in packaging; Tracy having outgrown them before even getting a chance to wear them.

Once home, he put them away in his closet and dresser. Since Joyce cleaned them before packing them away, they didn't need laundered again. Settling in, he decided to put off homework long enough to call Jennifer. Plopping down on the couch, he picked up the phone and dialed her number.

"*Hello?*" a woman answered.

"Hello." he answered. "Um... is *Jennifer* there? This is Jocelyn from school."

Hearing the smile over the phone, Josh was relieved to hear the woman being friendly. "*Oh! Yes, Jenny said you might call. One moment, dear.*"

The line went quiet for a moment before Josh heard the girl's voice. "*Hi, Jocelyn! Perfect timing!*"

"Just finish your homework?" he asked.

"No, just about to start History!" she said with a laugh. "*You saved me!*"

The two giggled about that for a moment before Josh nervously bit his lower lip. "Um... I was *wondering*. Are... um... are you doing anything on Sunday?"

I don't have any plans and Tracy, she's my BFF, she's got a cold... so I was *hoping* that maybe we could..." His voice trailed off in nervousness.

"Um... well, we go to church on Sunday." the girl answered. "Don't *you*? Or did you mean *after* that?"

Feeling self-conscious of his parents' unwillingness to even discuss religion unless it was to complain about Christians, he took the easy way out. "*Oh!* I meant *after!*" Not sure how things worked, he probed delicately. "So, when do you get back?"

"Usually about noon." she explained. "Daddy takes us out to brunch after! It's *so* much fun!" Pausing a moment, she considered how to ask what she wanted to. "We go to a non-denominational church... the one on Spring Drive? It's a Christian service, just without being too strict when it comes to... um... I forget what it's called. You know, the *details*? They leave that up to the congregation to figure out for themselves. I don't suppose you'd want to *join* us, would you? *Please* say yes! It would be *so* cool if you were there for brunch! We get dressed up nice and everything! Even my little brother looks nice and behaves himself for like a whole *hour!*"

Unsure, Josh tried to think of a good reason why he shouldn't go, but came up blank. "Well, I'd need a *ride*. You live close to the school, right? I live five miles away. Bus twenty-two's route."

"We could pick you up!" she offered. "I'm *sure* Mom and Dad wouldn't mind! I'd *love* for you to meet them! They're pretty cool... for *parents!*"

Wondering how he could go without his parents learning where he was going, he hit on a different idea. "Where exactly do you live? I could just get a ride *there*. I wouldn't want to inconvenience your parents or anything." Noting down the address, he smiled. "Can you hang on a few while I ask?"

"*Sure!*" Jennifer said happily. "I'll go ask Mom if it's OK! Be right back!"

While Jennifer ran off to ask her mother, Josh ran upstairs and opened his laptop. Bringing up the city bus website, he found her address and the bus that ran nearest. Tracing back to his neighborhood, he found the bus went through there as well. *Perfect!* he thought. Hitting print on the route's Sunday schedule, he went downstairs and knocked on his father's doorframe.

His focus broken, Fred turned and smiled at Josh. "What's *up*, princess?"

"I printed a bus schedule." he stated without detail. "May I have it, please?"

Getting up, he went over to the printer and took out the paper. Reading it quickly, he walked over and handed it to Josh. "What's *this* for?" he asked.

"Um... I met a new girl at school!" he said honestly. "Her name's Jennifer and she's *really* nice! She lives close to the school and wants me to come over to her house on Sunday. Can I go, Daddy? *Please!* I'll dress nice, I'll behave like a *perfect* lady, and you and Mom won't even have to drop me off or pick me up! I can take the bus and I'll be safe the whole time! I'll have my phone with me and *you* always say that the bus is safer than if you drove me there yourself! *Please?*" He knew he was playing it risky, that his father might offer to pick him up and drop him off, but he felt confident in his ploy.

Sighing as he stared into Josh's pleading eyes, he shook his head. "I see I'm gonna be in trouble as you get *older!*" he admitted. "You're *too* cute! Just be sure to use your insidious powers for *good* and not *evil!*" he laughed. "*Alright*, so long as your mother agrees, which I'm sure I can convince her, you can go! *Here.*" Picking up his wallet from the stand next to the door, he retrieved five one-dollar bills. "Just so you have money if you *need* it."

Taking the offered money, he wrapped his arms around his father's waist. "*Thank you, Daddy! You're the best!*" Running back to the phone with an unbreakable smile, he picked up the receiver. "*Jenn?*"

"*Well?*" Jennifer asked quickly. "Mom said she'd be *happy* to have you!"

"I asked Daddy and he said I could go! I'll just use the city bus, so no one needs to give me a ride or anything! What time do I need to be there?"

"Services start at nine. We usually leave about eight-thirty."

Scanning the bus schedule, he found the closest drop-off time before then and ran his finger back to the stop nearest his house. "*Perfect!* I can catch the eight o'clock bus and be at your house by eight-twenty!" Thinking of what she'd said earlier, he paused and asked, "Um... what should I wear? I don't know how dressed up you all get."

"Oh." Jennifer thought for a moment. "Well, Mom usually has me wear a nice dress. Not *too* fancy, but not casual clothes. Something like that overalls outfit you wore Monday would work! You looked *really* cute in that!"

Getting the idea, he smiled. "OK! So... I'll see you Sunday morning then!"

"I can't *wait!*" Jennifer glowed back. "Bye... *Jocelyn!*"

"Bye... *Jennifer!*" he answered back shyly as his heart accelerated at the way the girl said his name. Stopping and frowning for a moment, it dawned on him that it was the first time anyone had called him Jocelyn that he really liked hearing it. Smiling again as he put down the receiver, he skipped to the stairs before gliding up them in a haze of happiness to start his homework.

He spent until late Saturday morning going through his wardrobe, picking and discarding outfit after outfit, before frustratedly seeking out his mother. Finding her on the living room couch reading a book, he waited for her to see he was there.

Looking over the top of the pages, she smiled at him standing there patiently waiting in a jumper. "*Yes, sweetheart?*"

"Mom? You know Daddy told you I'm going to a friend's house tomorrow? I need *help!* I can't figure out what to wear!"

Laughing lightly as she got up, she took his hand and started toward the stairs. "Well, Miss *Perfection...* let's go see what your options are!"

After twenty minutes of hearing Josh say that this outfit was too casual and that dress was too formal, she finally threw her arms up. "I give up! Nothing I suggest is just right! You act like you're going on..." She stopped herself and looked at Josh with her eyes wide. "*Jocelyn*, sweetie... is this... a *date?*"

"*No!*" he protested. "I just want to look *nice* is all! Just not *too* nice."

Seeing his initial reaction, she sat on his bed and patted the coverlet for him to sit beside her. Once he had, she put an arm around him. "You *like* this girl... *don't* you, sweetie?"

"Of *course*, Mom!" he said emphatically. "Why *else* do you think I want to go over to her place?"

"No..." she explained. "I mean, you're *attracted* to her. *Aren't* you." she stated more than asked. "Does she like you the same way? Does she know your *history?* I mean... who we *thought* you were?"

His eyes widening at the idea, he leaned away from her as though she were crazy. "*Mom!* I'm only twelve, we only met on Friday, though Tracy's known her for years apparently, and we're just *friends!* And *yes...* she knows I used to be *Josh!* She's *totally* cool with it, though! So's her parents. She asked. They sound like people like you and Daddy... the *supportive* kind, I mean."

Smiling even as she pursed her lips in skepticism toward his insistence that they were only friends, she shook her head. "*Alright*, just friends. You want to look *nice*, just not *overdressed...* right?" Seeing him nod, she stood up and pulled him to his feet. "*Alright* then, grab your coat! We're going *shopping!*"

Six hours later, they returned with five new outfits. One, a matched floral knee-length skirt and blouse with a sweetheart neckline, another an off-white A-line dress with little pink flowers dotting it, two summer dresses, and the last a simple knee-length shift dress in dark blue with white piping. All five Josh considered perfect for a tween to wear to church... he hoped.

Hanging them in his closet, he pulled out the floral skirt and blouse and smiled. *Perfect!* he thought. Puzzling over his apparent happiness at wearing an outfit so girly, he wondered what it was that had changed. *I guess I'm just learning to like being a girl!* he hoped. Pondering that, his thoughts kept drifting to what Jennifer had said to him.

"You're way too pretty to hide it like that!"

Sighing at the memory, he found himself imagining dancing with Jennifer, then eating a nice dinner together... a walk through the park... and ending a night with the most perfect kiss in history.

Shaking himself from his reverie, he was stunned at the thought that he really was attracted to her. What was even weirder was that in his imaginings he was always dressed as a girl with her, and he'd *liked* it. Remembering himself dressed as a girl at school all week, he suddenly felt a knot in his stomach and that feeling of self-loathing again, except for Friday, and only after lunch.

Thinking about what he would wear on Monday, he was thinking of one of the pairs of jeans he'd gotten from Tracy and a nice pink top, he again hated the idea of wearing it to school. That is, until he imagined seeing Jennifer while wearing it, at which point his icky feeling melted into one of dreamy happiness. Experimenting with the idea, he imagined the same thing, but with Brenda, a girl he knew he liked, and the icky feeling came back.

"I'm *crazy!*" he mumbled. *I still don't like being a girl... unless I'm with Jennifer... and it's not just because I like her. So what's my deal?*

Shrugging and deciding he didn't care, he was just happy he'd found some way of dealing with his being backed into a corner by his parents. Putting away all his clothes other than the outfit he planned for the next morning, he headed for the shower. Scrubbing more thoroughly than normal, he spent extra time on his hair, washing it twice and conditioning it with a comb.

Remembering what the hairdresser Rachel had done, adding curls to his hair with a round brush and a blow dryer, he dried himself and headed for his room. After changing into a nightgown, he proceeded to dry his hair using the curling brush he found in his vanity. He'd barely begun when he saw his mother in the mirror.

"I knocked, but you couldn't hear me." she said with a smile once he'd turned off the dryer. "Would you like some help?" she offered. Seeing him nod shyly, she took the brush and dryer. "You'll have to fix it in the morning on your own." she stated as she began. "I'm not getting up at six in the morning to help you get ready for your not-a-date!"

Lying down in bed that night, he hoped that the next day would be half as wonderful as he imagined it could be. Drifting off to sleep, he dreamed of an unending dance, being held in Jennifer's arms as he looked into her hypnotically beautiful bright blue eyes.

It was the best dream he'd ever had.

Chapter 10 - When All Else Fails

Josh awoke at six as usual. He almost didn't need the alarm he'd set the night before, having gotten used to rising at that time anyway, but he was taking no chances. Jumping out of bed quickly, he got dressed. Putting on fresh white undies and white tights easily now that he'd had practice at it, he put on a pretty bra and then got into the skirt and blouse.

Going to his vanity, he spent half an hour fixing his hair, nearly burning his fingers on the curling iron a few times having only ever seen his mother use one twice. Content with the result after brushing the curls out into a cute wavy style, he moved on to makeup. Wishing he'd paid more attention when his mother had given him his one lesson, he ended up having to remove it all a few times before he felt happy with the result.

I get it! he praised himself on the fourth try. *Less is more!*

Picking the pink pearl stud magnetic earrings and the heart locket, he donned them and looked over the finished result. Smiling weakly that he looked every bit the sweet and innocent girl, he sprayed some perfume on his wrists and went to the closet, retrieving a pair of pink Mary Janes with a low heel. Putting them on, he looked at the whole picture in the closet mirror.

Wow! he stood in amazement, looking at the girl in his mirror. *Perfect! Not too dressy, but still nice and sweet! I hope it's right!*

Making his way out of his room, he noted that he had over twenty minutes before he needed to catch the bus. Allowing for five minutes to walk to the stop, and a few extra minutes to make sure he didn't miss it, he tried to sit and relax for the last few minutes before leaving.

Nibbling on a piece of toast to tide him over until brunch, he was surprised to see his mother come in. Gulping, he watched her cross the room and make her way into the kitchen. "Good morning, Mom." he said nervously.

"Good morning, sweetheart." she said groggily, putting the water on to make a cup of tea. "I wanted to see you off." Walking to the table, she sat while her water heated up. "Is that all you're *having*?" she asked concernedly.

"We're supposed to have brunch together." he explained. "That and my stomach was a bit *jumpy* this morning."

Getting up, she felt his forehead. Smiling as she sat back down, she sighed. "I just wanted to make sure you weren't getting that cold Tracy got. You look *very* nice, by the way!"

Blushing, he looked down and took another nibble of toast. "*Thanks!*" Noting that he didn't feel weird or icky when she complimented him, he chalked it up to thinking he was getting used to liking being a girl.

"Sweetie, I also wanted a quick word with you before you go." Melanie said softly. "I know you have high *hopes* for today, I just don't want to see you get *hurt* is all. So... just don't try to go *too* fast, OK? Take it slow and *enjoy* your time with her!" Reaching out, she fixed a few hairs back into place.

"Oh, *Mom!*" he whined as he finished his toast and got up to rinse the small plate and put it in the dishwasher. "It's not a *date*, OK? It's just a nice brunch with a *friend* and her family! It's not like I'm gonna ask her to *marry* me or somethin'!" Drying his hands on a dishtowel, he looked at the time and saw he still had almost five minutes left, but he wanted to get away from her. "I should go." he lied. Walking over to his mother, he hugged her weakly and kissed her cheek as Melanie returned the hug.

"I *know*, sweetheart. I trust you. You're your own *person* and I can't *control* you. I just worry sometimes. I *shouldn't*. It's bad for your self-esteem and sense of self." Releasing him, she got up to walk him to the door. "You don't have a *purse*, honey?"

"Do I *need* one?" he asked impatiently.

"Come with me." she ordered as she led him up to his room. Opening the side of his closet with his blouses and skirts, she opened a drawer full of purses and pulled a shiny pink one out that matched his shoes. "Take this." she said as she went over to his vanity. Seeing the makeup he'd left out, she picked up the blush, compact, lipstick, and eyeshadow and put them in his purse. "Put your money, phone, and ID in there too, sweetie." Seeing him fish his phone out of his bra strap, his money folded inside it, she shook her head.

"*What!*" he protested. "*All the girls put their phone there!*"

Walking back to the door a few minutes later, she sighed. "Good thing I got *up!* Hope you have a nice time, sweetheart! Call if you need anything!"

Heading out the door at a brisk but still dignified pace, he turned back and waved at her. "I will, Mom!"

Strutting down the block toward the city bus stop, he pulled out his phone and looked at the time. Smiling that he was still ahead of schedule, he slowed his pace, not wanting to work up a sweat, and truly enjoying the bright and crisp late summer morning. He could smell the flowers from Mrs. Hanson's yard as he passed her house, giggling at how she might react if she knew who the pretty 'girl' going by her house was. Soon he arrived at the stop, a few minutes later seeing the bus turn the corner ten blocks down the road at a cross street.

The trip passed uneventfully as he was the only one on the bus, other than the driver and the man sleeping on the furthest back seats. The driver gave him an odd look as he paid the fare, but nothing more than that. Getting off at his stop, he started down the street and read the house numbers, searching for Jennifer's home.

The neighborhood was nice, the houses all upper-middle class in style, and he actually thought it a much warmer and more welcoming place than his own upper-scale neighborhood. Seeing the pattern in house numbering, he

determined that Jennifer's house must be three more down the street. Looking it over as he approached, he smiled at the homey looking dwelling.

White trim adorned a simple single-story house of pale gray. The outside was nicely maintained with a small rock garden in the front yard, a fence of trees and nicely trimmed hedges lining the yard along the sidewalk. A flowerbed bordered the driveway and a healthy green lawn filled the spaces in between. A red minivan sat in the driveway, off to one side so as to not block access to the one-car attached garage.

As he turned up the driveway, he nervously took a deep breath. Heading up the walkway that curved around the garage to the front door, he noted his appearance in the glass of the screen door while the scent of fresh-cut grass tickled his nose and the sound of a lawnmower somewhere in the distance filled the silence of the morning. Checking his hair and straightening his blouse and skirt before ringing the doorbell, it was just eight twenty-five.

Hearing heavy footsteps approaching the door, he knew it wasn't Jennifer. Peering through the screen mesh and glass, the door opened to reveal a lovely woman in her early thirties, but appearing more like her mid twenties. She wore a cream satin shirtwaist dress that came down to mid-calf, low heeled pumps the same color, and her soft dirty-blond hair was worn in an up-do of curls that emphasized her long neck and lovely face that had only a little makeup to enhance her natural beauty.

"*Jocelyn?*" she said with a smile. "*Please! Come in!*"

Opening the screen door, he cautiously stepped into the entry hallway of the brightly decorated home. "*Hello, Mrs. Healy.*" Josh said politely and softly. "*Thank you for allowing me to come.*" While his own parents downplayed social niceties as phony social posturing, he'd been influenced by Joyce Edwards to appreciate the natural 'glue' they provided to awkward initial meetings with people you didn't know.

"*Well!*" Victoria Healy said with a smile as she closed the door. "Don't you look *lovely*, Jocelyn! My Jenny has been *glowing* about you for *days* now, and I can see why! And please, call me Vicky!"

Just as Josh was about to say something, Jennifer came around the corner from the living room and the two stopped and stared at one another for a heartbeat that lasted several hours. While Jennifer looked Josh over from toe to bow, Josh similarly took in the vision in front of him. Wearing a long-sleeve white blouse with lace around the collar, the skirt was a similar color to her mother's dress and fell just below her knees. Her straight blonde hair was pulled back with a simple off-white headband, showing off her lovely smile. Altogether, she was a vision of youthful beauty just about to spring forth from the sapling.

"*Wow!*" Jennifer said after a moment. "You look *great!* Is that what you *usually* wear to church? It's *lovely!*"

Swallowing hard, Josh forced himself to pull his mind together from the shattered pieces Jennifer had left it in and answered as best he could. "N... no. I actually got this yesterday with my Mom just for today. We don't normally dress up on Sunday." He hoped that not mentioning church, just alluding to it, would be enough.

"I hope your mother didn't go to *too* much trouble." Vicky said, stepping over to the mirror in the entryway, touching up her hair and adding a small flowered hat. "We as a family like to put in an effort to look nice. It's our way of respecting Him in our hearts and helps us feel closer to one another as a family. You could have worn what you normally wear and it would have been *fine*, Jocelyn!"

"It's alright, Mrs. ... um... *Vicky.*" he corrected himself. "It wasn't any trouble. Mom and I needed to do some shopping. I needed more clothes than I have right now *anyway*. When Jenny said you dress nice for church, I just didn't want to disrespect your faith. She didn't get into the reasons."

Finishing touching up, she looked down at the small child. "Well, so long as it wasn't any trouble!" she said with a smile. Putting on her off-white gloves, she walked with a carefree grace into the living room. "Come *on!* We'll introduce you to the *men* in our lives!"

He tentatively made to follow Jennifer into the living room, feeling her take him by the hand and walk with him into the room wearing a broad smile.

Looking at the place, it was modestly decorated but felt warm and inviting. The opposite wall held a broad fireplace with a large photo of the family above it, obviously taken somewhat recently as Jennifer looked much the same. Though dressed in a formal gown, her genuine smile and the mirthful sparkle in her eyes made the picture look candid and alive. Along the wall to the right was a white gauzy curtain that extended to the floor, hiding a large sliding glass door behind it, while a flat-screen TV sat to the right of the door. Along the left wall was a white leather couch facing the TV, with a matching loveseat on the wall opposite the fireplace. A creamy plush carpet covered the floor while a ceiling fan turned slowly in the cool of the morning.

Seated on the couch was a small boy in a dark blue suit, fidgeting with his feet as they dangled over the edge. He appeared to be a few years younger than Josh, perhaps nine or ten. His short light brown hair was nicely combed and his suit made the boy handsome, despite the many freckles adorning his nose and cheeks. "Are we ready *now*, Momma?" he asked impatiently.

"*Luke?* I want you to meet a friend of your sister's. This is Jocelyn. *Jocelyn?* This is our son, Luke."

The boy politely got up and walked over to Josh, looking him over. "Nice to meet you." he said rotely as he extended his hand.

Taking the boy's hand gently, Josh barely shook it. "Nice to meet you *too*, Luke. You look *nice!*" she answered, secretly envying the boy's attire.

Dismissing the compliment with an eye-roll, Luke was about to turn and walk back to the couch when he saw his mother's stern look. Turning back to Josh, he sighed. "Thanks. You look OK *too*, Jocelyn." Looking back at his mother for approval, she shook her head and repressed a laugh.

"*Boys!*" the woman said softly. "Let me introduce you to a *real* gentleman!"

Walking over to the dining room table, which was in an open room adjacent to the living room just to the left of the fireplace, Josh's eyes fell on a man wearing a suit very similar to the one Luke was wearing, but much finer. His foot was up on one of the table's chairs, using a rag in his hands to buff his black leather shoes. Stopping as his wife approached, he looked up at her and smirked.

"Who, *me*? A gentleman? Who blabbed?" he joked, looking over at his guest.

Laughing lightly, Vicky smiled and turned to Josh. "*Jocelyn*? This is Jenny's father, John. *Honey*? This is Jenny's new *friend*, Jocelyn."

Dropping the cloth on the dining room table and moving into the living room, the man towered easily eighteen inches over Josh's height. His frame was obviously well muscled, but not so much as to mark him as vain. His face was ruggedly handsome, and his short light brown hair, while well groomed, looked to need a haircut soon. As his blue eyes gazed down at Josh, he bent at the waist slightly and offered his hand. "*Very* nice to meet you, Jocelyn! You look *very* beautiful!"

Blushing and feeling funny at the compliment, like a sick feeling in his belly at a grown man finding him beautiful, Josh tentatively took his offered hand. Shaking gently, he released it and watched John straighten up and turn to his wife.

"Was *that* OK, love?" he said with an impish grin.

Dismissing him with a slap to the shoulder, she laughed. "Oh, go *on* then! Get your coat and let's go!" Turning to the two apparent girls, Josh's left hand still in Jennifer's right, she sighed. "You ready, Jocelyn? Need to use the ladies' room first?"

Thinking it would be better to use it there than at the church where he'd have to use the men's room, he nodded. "Which way?"

Vicky started to point back the way they'd come, Jennifer interrupting her mother's explanation. "*I'll* show her, Mom. *This* way, Jocelyn!" Leading him past the entry hallway, they entered a hallway and went back towards the garage. "Here." she said simply, pointing to the first door on the right. "I'll wait for you right here!" she said with a smile.

Going in and locking the door, he quickly sat and did his business, having already learned that going while standing and wearing a skirt was next to impossible with only two hands. Washing up afterward, he checked his makeup in the mirror, using the compact to touch up a little shininess on his nose before approving of his appearance.

He had no clue what was about to happen to him, having never been in a church in his life, but based on the way he felt at that moment, there was no way on earth he was going to leave Jennifer's side. Even if they began a ritual blood sacrifice at the alter, he was committed. Hearing a gentle knock on the door as he tried to calm himself, he started at the sound.

"*Jocelyn?*" Jennifer called out. "Time to go."

"*Coming!*" he shouted back as he closed his purse and unlocked the door. Exiting and seeing Jennifer looking at him with her wonderful smile, he completely forgot where he was or what he was about to do. Smiling back as Jennifer held out her hand, he took it and the two joined the three others in the entry hallway.

Heading out into the still-rising sun, the heat of the day was nowhere near, but the promise of it could be felt in the warmth on their skin. John locked the house while the four made their way to the minivan in the driveway. When Vicky opened up the driver's side sliding door and gestured for the three children to enter, Luke attempted to rush in.

"Me *first!*" he shouted, trying to vault into the booster seat on the passenger side.

Catching him by the arm, Vicky tutted. "Ladies *first*, young man!"

Cowed, he bowed his head in shame. "*Sorry!*"

At last letting go of Josh's hand, Jennifer climbed in and made her way to the back row bench seat. "Back here, Jocelyn! We can sit *together!*"

Following the girl to the rear seat, Jennifer having taken the driver's side, Josh gracefully placed himself on the passenger side and buckled in while Vicky situated Luke in his booster seat. When at last the two adults took their seats in the front, John driving and Vicky next to him, John looked back at the two as the engine started.

"Everyone belted in?" Hearing no objection, he smiled at the two. "*Good!* Church is about fifteen minutes away, so we have plenty of time." Pulling out onto the residential street, he waved at one of the neighbors working in their yard who waved in return as they drove past.

Turning to Jennifer, Josh noticed she seemed to be staring at him. Feeling self-conscious, he leaned in slightly. "What is it? Is something *wrong?*"

Smiling at him, Jennifer shook her head. "No. It's just..." At a loss for words, she blushed and looked at her lap. Taking a breath, she looked back up at him. "It's just... you're *too* beautiful!" she said barely above a whisper.

Worried, Josh looked at his outfit. "I thought this was just right. I'm sorry I overdressed!" he answered embarrassedly.

"No! Not *that!*" Jennifer said softly. "I mean *you!* The outfit is *perfect!* You fit right in! I mean you're too beautiful for *anyone* to think you were ever..."

"A *boy?*" he finished for her. Suddenly feeling guilty for being and feeling like one, he cast his eyes downward. "I *know.*"

"It's nothing to be *ashamed* of, Jocelyn!" Jennifer said, trying to cheer him up. "I meant it in a *nice* way! You... you're..." she blushed heavily as she stared at him. "You're like a *dream.* You *can't* be for real!"

Now feeling quite flattered, he smiled at the compliment and looked in her beautiful blue eyes. "Jenny? Can I ask you something?"

"*Anything!*" she answered.

"Do you... um... like... uh... *like* me? Like *more* than as a friend?"

Her face rapidly turning from elated to terrified, she looked away from him quickly and out the window. "Um... why would you ask me *that?*"

Fearing that he'd misunderstood, he shrugged. "I guess no reason. Maybe... the way you *look* at me? It's OK, I didn't mean to offend you by asking. I don't wanna lose you as a friend. I just thought... never mind. It's *stupid.*"

Turning slowly and shyly back to face him, Jennifer looked near to tears. "If I tell you something, you *promise* to keep it a secret?"

Gulping, he nodded and said, "I promise."

Biting her lower lip, she looked at him and decided he meant it. Leaning in as far as she could, she waited for Josh to lean his ear closer. As soon as

she felt he was close enough she could whisper and he would hear her, she shared her secret. "*I like you. A lot! Too much for you being a girl! I think I did from the first moment I saw you on the first day of school!*"

Leaning back to look at her, he saw the fear in her eyes and knew she was telling the truth. Stunned, he looked down at his lap. "And me being a girl doesn't *change* that?" Looking back at her, he saw her just shake her head no.

The rest of the drive to the church was passed in silence. When they arrived, Josh looked out the window to see a simple building with a high vaulted roof and a steeple off to one side. It was a modern building, obviously built in the last thirty years, but it still had an old-world style to it. Pulling into a parking space, John killed the motor and the two adults got out and opened the side doors. While Vicky helped Luke out and closed his door, John offered his hand first to Josh and then to his daughter to help them out.

Walking toward the building together, Josh felt Jennifer's hand in his again and her gripping it tightly. Looking over to her, she was smiling at him and blushing heavily before turning away embarrassedly. Squeezing her hand in return, he was glad to see her turn to see him grinning at her.

Entering the open double doors, the pastor was there, greeting the people as they entered. "*John! Vicky!* Glad to see you, as always!" he offered happily. Looking behind them, he saw a new addition to their usual group. "And who are we lucky enough to have as your guest this morning?"

Vicky took charge of introductions. "Pastor Roberts? This is Jennifer's friend, *Jocelyn*. She wanted to join us this morning!"

Looking at the man, Josh got a sense that he wasn't someone to be feared, but someone you could trust, like a teacher or a Principal. As the man knelt down to his level, he held out a hand to Josh.

"I'm so glad you *did*, Jocelyn! Have you ever been to church before?"

Faced with someone directly asking the question he'd hoped no one would, he swallowed hard and lowered his gaze before slowly shaking his head.

"N... no, sir." Looking up at Jennifer and then her parents, he expected them to be angry, but they only looked puzzled. "D... do I need to *go*? I'm *sorry*."

Looking up at the Healys as he continued kneeling, the pastor turned back to Josh. "I don't *want* you to go, but maybe you should talk with Mr. and Mrs. Healy first, OK?" Standing up, he nodded toward a small room off to the side used for coats during foul weather that was currently unoccupied.

Vicky took Jennifer's hand and lead her, and Josh by virtue of the girl's unwillingness to let go of his hand, into the room while John told Luke to go off to his Sunday School class. After John came in and closed the door, the two parents turned to Josh and knelt down to look him in the eye.

"Are you *mad* at me?" Josh asked terrified. "I... I never *said* I went to church, I just... I never told you I *didn't* go."

Jennifer tried to intercede on his behalf. "It's *my* fault, Mom! I just *assumed* she went to church! I never actually *asked* her! *Please* don't be mad at her!"

"We're not *mad*, sweetie." John said calmly. "We're just... *concerned*."

"*Jocelyn*?" Vicky said gently. "Do your parents know where you are?"

"They know I'm with *you*." he answered truthfully. "They trust me! *Honest*!"

"Did they know we were going to *church*?" she asked more directly.

Shaking his head, he sighed in defeat. "*No*. If they did they'd have never let me come. They say *really* bad things about Christians."

Closing her eyes in sorrow, Vicky sighed before opening them and looking at Josh. "Then why did you want to come with us?"

Looking from Vicky to John and then to Jennifer, he turned back to Jennifer's mother. "Because I think they're *wrong* a lot. They've always told me things I *know* are wrong... I can't say *what*... it's very *private*... but I *know* they say things that are wrong, so I wanted to see for myself. *Please*? Let me stay? I just wanted to know what it's all about."

"I'll be thirteen in like five months!" Josh continued arguing unbidden. "My parents trust me to go *anywhere* in town without me even having to *ask*! If I wanted to, I could have just walked into a church... or a synagogue... or a mosque... *anytime*. I just thought... well... since Jennifer seemed so nice, and she *invited* me, that it'd be OK. If it's not, I'll just catch the bus back home and maybe try going to a *different* church next week on my own. I don't want to cause you any problems."

Looking at one another and shrugging, not sure what to do, the two adults stood back up and John went to the door, opening it and gesturing for Pastor Roberts to come in. Explaining in brief what Josh had just told them, the pastor came over and knelt down in front of the boy again.

"*Jocelyn*? Have your parents *ever* told you that you *cannot* attend church?" he asked gently.

Josh shook his head slowly. "No, sir."

"And you're telling me the *truth*? It's *important*. If they have, you *have* to tell me, unless you want *me* to get in trouble."

Smiling, Josh shook his head again. "*No*, sir! They've *never* told me *not* to go to church. Not *ever*! I think they think I just wouldn't *want* to go."

Standing up with a grin, he turned to the concerned parents. "In Ohio, it's perfectly legal to expose someone, even a minor, to religious ideas. So long as *Jocelyn* here is not violating the rules of her parents' home, and I choose to believe her when she says she isn't, then no law is being broken and she's

welcome in my church. I trust her because she could have easily lied to me when I asked if she'd ever attended church before, but she *didn't*. If you two are uncomfortable with the situation, then she can be *my* guest today!"

John and Vicky looked at one another before Vicky shook her head and turned back to him. "*No, Pastor!*" she answered for them both. "*It's fine!* Jocelyn was *Jennifer's* guest, and she should *remain* so! Thank you for your help!"

"*Anytime!*" he smiled at them and then down at the two children holding hands again. "And girls? Let this be a lesson to you *both*. When all else fails... just tell the *truth!*"

Chapter 11 - Honesty is the Best Policy

After the service, the family went to their usual restaurant for brunch. Josh was quiet and contemplative, distracted as he mentally deconstructed the topic, *The Sermon on the Mount*. He didn't understand the context, other than in theory, so all he could do was judge the value based on the words spoken. He ate his turkey club sandwich absently, staring off into space as he pondered the words that seemed to be in total contradiction with the impression his parents had given him of the Christian faith.

Getting up, Jennifer tapped Josh on the shoulder to get his attention. "Come with me!" she said happily.

Not even knowing what she was doing, Josh took her hand and would have eagerly followed her if she said she was going to get her appendix removed. When they reached the ladies restroom though, Josh stopped and brought the girl to a halt as well.

"I can't go in *there!*" he whispered with eyes wide.

"Why *not?*" she asked innocently, reminding Josh of the answer his mother gave when she wanted to be evasive. "You're a *girl!*"

"Not *really.*" he pointed out quietly.

"Well, you can't use the *men's* room dressed like *that!*" she answered with a giggle. "Just come *on!* No one's gonna think you're a *boy*, so what *difference* does it make?" she insisted as she started pulling him along by the arm.

Slowly giving in, he let himself be pulled into the ladies room. Luckily it was empty and Josh soon discovered that the two glasses of milk he'd drunk had caught up with him and he actually *did* need to go. Slipping quickly into a stall, he sat down and just tried to pretend he was in the boys' room. The illusion was shattered a moment later when Jennifer started talking.

"*Jocelyn?*" she said from the adjacent stall. "Thank you for coming!"

"Thank you for *inviting* me." Josh answered nervously, unused to the way women talk so freely in the bathroom. After he was done, he left the stall to wash his hands while Jennifer continued to chatter away. Just as he finished, a middle-aged woman came in and peered down at him.

"Don't *you* look nice!" she offered sweetly as she paused before going into the stall he'd just vacated. Finding it unsettling that a strange woman was about to do something very private in the same room he was in, Josh quickly dried his hands and exited. Leaning against the wall outside the door, he exhaled and pondered why it made him so uncomfortable when he'd never felt that way in the men's room. *I thought I was starting to like all this?*

After he stood and waited a few minutes, Jennifer finally came out. Her brow furrowed, she looked at him quizzically. "Why didn't you *wait* for me?"

"I *did!*" he insisted. "I'm *here*, aren't I?"

"No, I mean... why didn't you wait *inside*? I was talking to *myself* in there!"

Unsure how to answer, he gave the only explanation he could. "When boys are done, they just *leave*. All I know about bathroom etiquette is from being a boy. That was my first time in the ladies room." Walking slowly back to their table, he noticed Jennifer take his hand again.

"I *suppose* that makes sense. I never see boys go to the restroom together, so why would they *wait* for each other? I just never *thought* about it before."

"Why *do* girls go to the bathroom together?" Josh asked innocently.

"To *talk!*" she said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Well, that and in case one of us *needs* something that the other one is carrying if we run out. *You* know... something we need one week a month?"

Confused for a moment, slowly it dawned on him what she was talking about and his eyes went wide. "*Oh!* You mean... OK. I'm almost sorry I *asked!*" he finished with a blush.

"You're *adorable* when you're embarrassed!" she giggled as they approached the table.

Rejoining the rest of the family, Josh enjoyed the happy ease with which they conducted a simple brunch. *They do this every week?* he wondered. Several times he was even drawn into their chats. *The best night out with my parents was that night last week when I first went out dressed like a girl, and even that night was nothing compared to this! They never seem to get mad about anything!* After a little more than an hour eating and chatting, Luke started fidgeting restlessly.

"*That's* our cue that we're done!" John said with a smile. Getting up, he dropped a ten dollar bill on the table, before taking the check up to the front counter to pay.

While the rest of the family and Josh made their way to the car, Josh leaned in and whispered to Jennifer, their hands once more together. "*Jenn?* Why did your dad drop *cash* on the table?"

Looking at him perplexedly, she shrugged. "He was tipping the waitress! Don't *your* parents do that?"

Blinking absently, he tried to think of an instance, but the closest thing that came to mind was the loose change that they dropped in cups and hats of panhandlers. "I don't know. They never talk to me about things like money or what to do at a restaurant. Daddy always pays with a credit card. Can you give a tip on one of those?"

"I *think* so." she answered. "They must always do it *that* way."

Climbing in the back seat, the two rode back to the Healy's home in relative silence, interrupted by an occasional glance at one another and shy giggling.

Pulling into the driveway, just as the two parents let the children out of the car, Josh felt his cell phone vibrating. Climbing out, he was in too good a mood to care that it was his parents calling. "*Hi!*" he said happily.

"*Hi, sweetie!*" Melanie said, much more cheerful than usual. "Having *fun?*"

"*Yeah!*" he replied, looking back at Jennifer. "We just got back from brunch. I had a turkey club and it was *really* good! The Healys are *very* nice!"

"That's *great*, sweetheart!" she said honestly. "I'm *so* glad! I know I was worried, but you're your *own* person and know your own mind. I just wanted to know when you're coming home. No *rush!* Not trying to cramp your style or anything, but your father wanted to take me out and we need to know if you were going to be home soon. *Fred! Stop* that! I'm talking to *Jocelyn!*"

"*Hi, princess!*" Josh heard in the background. "*Love* you!"

Rolling his eyes, Josh sighed and looked at Jennifer, who was the only one still outside; the others having gone in. "Tell Daddy I love him too!" he said, shaking his head. "You guys go ahead. I think it'd be OK if I hang out here a while." Eyeing Jennifer questioningly, he was rewarded with a look of utter joy on the girl's face. "Yeah, it should be fine!"

"OK, sweetheart!" his mother replied. "We'd like you home by dinnertime. Is that alright? *Love* you, baby! See you in a while! *Bye!*"

Hearing his mother burst into laughter as the line disconnected, he went up to the waiting girl. "They said I can stay out 'til dinnertime. That's usually at seven. I'll need to leave by six-thirty to get the bus home. You *sure* it's OK?"

"Let's go ask!" she said, taking his hand as the two ran to the house together.

Slowing as they came in the door, Jennifer found her mother in the master bedroom removing the bobby pins holding her hair up; the door wide open. "Mom? Jocelyn's parents said she could stay out until seven, that's when they have dinner. Can she stay until then?"

Looking at the two who looked back at her expectantly, she sighed. "Well, let me ask your father what *he* thinks, but I don't see why she *can't* stick around a while. Why don't you show her your room while we talk it over?"

Squealing with delight, she practically pulled Josh's arm out as she went a short way down the hall, opened a door on the opposite side from her parents' room, and pulled him in. "This is *my* room!" she said proudly.

Looking around, it was smaller than his, but her bed was only a twin instead of a double, so there was almost as much room. "Nice." he said honestly, thinking it was better, as in less girly, than his own. Checking out her posters, they were mostly of popular girl bands with a few landscapes.

"What posters do *you* have up in your room?" she asked. "This one is my *favorite!* It's from an old movie!"

Looking at the poster of Austrian hillsides, he smiled. "*The Sound of Music!* I *love* that movie! Julie Andrews is *so* cool!"

"What other movies do you like?"

Grinning like a piano keyboard, Josh sat on her bed and started ticking off his fingers. "I have original movie posters for *West Side Story*, *Oklahoma*, *The King and I*, *My Fair Lady*, *Hello Dolly*, and *The Fiddler on the Roof!* Daddy put them in actual theater display frames for me! I *love* old musicals! They have such *great* songs and *wonderful* period costumes!"

Seeing him so animated and happy was infectious for Jennifer, even though she hadn't even heard of half of the movies he'd mentioned. "That sounds *so*

cool! I'd *love* to see them sometime! Your *posters*, I mean! I've seen some of those movies over at my grandma's house. I don't think she *has* the first few you said, though."

Stunned, he stared at her and asked, "You've never seen *West Side Story*? It's just like the best musical *ever*! It's *Romeo and Juliet* done in the slums of New York in the 50s. It won like *ten* Academy Awards that year, the most of any musical! You have *got* to see it! It's like *thee* best movie in *history*!"

"Better than *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*?" she asked skeptically.

"I wouldn't know." Josh admitted as his enthusiasm died. "I haven't *seen* it."

Smiling, she sat down next to him and took his hand again. "That's because it isn't *out* yet! It doesn't come out 'til December! The previews make it look like it's gonna be *thee* best, though!" she echoed his enthusiasm. Biting her lower lip nervously she asked, "Would... would you come see it *with* me?"

Shyly grinning back, he nodded and squeezed her hand. "I'd *love* to!"

Sitting silently together a moment, staring into each other's eyes, eventually Jennifer got up and let go his hand. "You wanna play a game or something? We could go for a walk in the park just down the street... or watch a movie? I don't think we have any old musicals, though."

Just as Josh was about to answer, Vicky stepped in the room. "Mind if your father and I have a talk with Jocelyn first, sweetie?" she asked.

"Sure." Jennifer said as she walked over to her mother for a hug. "Just don't beat her *too* badly, Mom!" she said as she let go and ran out laughing gaily.

Exhaling heavily, Vicky pulled out the chair from Jennifer's desk. "Come sit over here, dear. I *promise*... no *beatings*!"

Giggling, he moved from the bed to the chair as Vicky sat on the girl's bed and John entered, mostly closing the door behind him. Moving to sit next to his wife, the two sighed as they considered what to say.

"Am I in *trouble*?" he asked, his smile fading. "Did I do something *bad*?"

"No, sweetie." Vicky said gently. "Not as *such*. We just want to know a little more *about* you, is all. Jenny seems *very* fond of you and we..."

Seeing his wife of fifteen years unsure of how to put it, he finished for her. "We have some... *concerns*." he put it delicately. "She only just met you last week, but for the last six days she hasn't been able to stop talking about you and... well... we were *curious* about you. You said your parents have said bad things about Christians?"

Nodding, Josh felt the air collapse from his lungs. *Figures! Those two are gonna ruin my friendship with Jenn and they aren't even here!* "Yeah. Does that mean you don't want Jenn and I to be friends?"

"No!" they chorused.

Turning to one another, John deferred to Vicky. "Sweetheart, we'd never hold *you* responsible for things your parents say! You seem like a very open and *caring* girl and we... we're just concerned that you might *repeat* some of the things that your parents have said to Luke or Jennifer. We don't believe you would, because we've gotten to know you, but... we just need you to tell us that you won't... for *now*. When you're *older* perhaps, but we don't want the children to be exposed to that degree of animosity toward their faith just yet. You're only young once, and we want them to have an innocent time in their lives when they don't have to worry about such things. There's plenty of time for *that* when they get a few years older."

"Understand, Jocelyn..." John added, "...we're not asking you to *lie*... just don't bring it up, and if they ask, say you can't *talk* about it. That's *all*."

"We'll believe you if you give us your word, dear. We've seen you're an *honest* girl." Vicky finished.

Being called an 'honest girl' made Josh feel a severe pang of guilt that he wasn't actually a girl, and wasn't being truthful with them about that. He wouldn't lie to them if they directly asked, but he also knew he looked so much like a girl that they never would. *Not for a few years anyway, and only if I manage to get out of taking hormone blockers.* Deciding that some things were just private, and that it was his choice who to tell and who not to tell, he justified keeping it from them for the time being.

Looking at them a moment, he nodded. "I promise. I won't tell them the things my parents say about Christians until *you* say I can."

Expressions of relief washing over the two, John stood up and headed for the door. "I'll let you ladies finish. I'll go check on the kids."

As the man closed the door firmly behind him, Josh turned back to Vicky and swallowed hard. *This can't be good.* he thought.

Vicky bit her lower lip nervously, reminding him of Jennifer's habit and showing him where she'd gotten it. "*Jocelyn*, I wanted to ask you something *privately* because it's a sensitive subject and I didn't want to embarrass you. *OK?*" Seeing Josh nod, she pressed forward. "I... I noticed Jenny taking more of an interest in you than normal... for a girl. She..." Pausing as she tried to formulate the words delicately, she sighed and did her best. "She... *likes* you, more than girls *normally* like other girls. You *know* that, *don't* you?"

Blushing and turning away, he saw the poster for *The Sound of Music*, which reminded him of nuns, which in turn reminded him of Pastor Roberts and the friendly man's good advice. *When all else fails, tell the truth.* Looking back at Jennifer's mother, he hesitated only a moment before he nodded his head slowly.

Moving on, Vicky scooted forward and reached out to take Josh's hands. "*Jocelyn?* Do you have *similar* feelings for my Jenny? *Please* tell me the *absolute* truth. I won't judge you either way, but I *have* to know the truth."

A tear escaped his right eye as he fought the desire to deny it, certain that as soon as he did so, he would no longer be welcome in their home. Still, he felt he could do nothing less than tell her the truth. Slowly, tears dropping silently down his cheeks, he almost imperceptibly nodded his head.

Seeing how scared he was, Vicky slid off the bed to her knees and hugged Josh, cradling his head to her breast as though he were her own daughter. "*Shhh!* It's *OK*, sweetheart. I'm *not* mad! You can't *help* what you feel! I *understand!* I've *got* you!"

Feeling the comforting embrace and hearing her words of true compassion and tolerance, Josh released all his pent-up fear, anguish, repressed self-loathing, and bitterness that he'd been pushing aside and burying inside of himself for weeks. Unable to stem the tide once the dam was broken, he sobbed openly into Vicky's shoulder and clung to her as though he might drown in his own tears if he let go.

After a time, finally the feelings of helplessness and self-loathing began to ebb, at least enough he could regain his composure and some of his outward dignity. "S... sorry... V... Vicky." he said though halting sobs. "I... I... I didn't... mean to... lose con... control... like that." he blubbered. Taking the tissue she offered him, he wiped his face and blew his nose. "I must look a *fright!*"

Laughing at his use of such an old-fashioned expression gleaned from his beloved old movies, Vicky shook her head. "*No*, dear! Though you might want to clean up before you come out of Jenny's room!" Pausing to let him calm himself and use another tissue to dry his face and eyes, Vicky guided him to sit next to her on Jennifer's bed. "*Feeling better?*" she asked. Seeing Josh nod, she sighed and looked away at her daughter's girl band posters.

"John and I were afraid of this." she admitted to the boy. "She's never shown *any* interest in boys, even though all the other girls her age have. We were hoping that it was just a *phase*, but it's *not*." Turning to Josh, she smiled at him gently. "Yes, we know it's *not* your fault! *You* didn't make our daughter g... gay. *Nobody* did. We don't hate you, *or* her, for something you had no hand in. May... may I ask you something personal?"

Josh took a breath and nodded. "*Anything*." he answered.

Turning away, embarrassed to be asking a twelve-year-old this, she forged ahead regardless. "Have... Is Jenny the *first* girl that you've liked this way?"

Slowly shaking his head, Josh answered honestly. "No. There's another girl at school I liked, but she doesn't like *me*."

"That hurts no matter *who* you are or *who* you like." Vicky said with a sigh. "We've *all* been there. Last year, Jenny... well... I shouldn't tell you things about her. That should be up to her if she shares them with you. Suffice it to say, she liked a girl and the feeling *wasn't* mutual. Jenny was *devastated* for *months*. We knew, but hoped it might *change* her. God's work is sometimes very painful to endure, but a greater good always comes *from* it to erase the hurt. It just sometimes takes longer than we'd like."

Biting her lip again, Vicky looked at Josh once more. "I... I'm *afraid* for my daughter, Jocelyn. Afraid that out of love for someone, she'll abandon her faith and turn *against* us. John and I *promised* each other that no matter what, we wouldn't do *anything* that might drive her away from us. We may not *like* it, but we can't do that to our own daughter. I'm telling you all this because I think you might understand. You may only be twelve, but you have an air of wisdom to you *beyond* your years. I feel like you not only understand, but that... well... *we* think you can help."

Looking up at her, Josh furrowed his brow. "How can *I* help? I can't even help *myself*! There's a part of me that makes me different. I *wish* I could

make it go away, but I *can't*." He hated not telling her everything, but he wasn't ready to face the possible rejection, so he equivocated.

"I understand, sweetie." she said, squeezing him with the arm she'd wrapped around his shoulders. "What I *mean* is that you can... well... *be* there for her. She *likes* you... and so do John and I. We were *both* impressed with your honesty and how you wanted to learn about our faith for yourself, *despite* what your parents told you. That means you aren't likely to try and force your opinions on others... even if you don't *share* them."

Sighing as she couldn't believe the words she was about to say, she let go of her fear and said them anyway, trusting to providence. "We... we wouldn't *object* to you two spending... *time*... with each other, if that's what you two want, so long as you can respect the *limits* we set, and providing, of course, that your *own* parents approve, which we gather, they're likely to."

Turning to face Vicky, Josh was in complete stupefaction at what he was hearing. Having fully expected to be thrown out of their house for admitting he liked Jennifer as more than a friend, here they were, all but giving them permission to date each other.

"Just so you know, if you'd have said that the feeling *wasn't* mutual, I'd have believed you... and then asked you to leave and never return, hoping that in a few weeks Jenny would get over you." Vicky admitted. "We couldn't *stand* to watch her work herself up over another girl, only to be spurned again. If you *didn't* like her that way, we would have tried to minimize the hurt by ending your relationship right away. Do you understand?"

Regarding Vicky, Josh released the breath he was holding as he realized that the truth was what had saved him. "OK. I understand. So... *what* limits?"

Confused for a moment, she blushed and looked away as she began to follow his question. "Oh! Um... well for starters, you can't be *alone* anywhere, like in this room, or *yours*, with the door closed. Secondly, no *public* displays of

affection. That's mostly for your and Jenny's protection. Here in the house, or at yours or another private place where it's *safe*, it would be... *permitted*. Lastly, Luke *cannot* know about your relationship, so you'd have to make sure he never *sees* anything that would be... well... *inappropriate*... for a nine-year-old boy. This would be the case until he's at least a teenager. By then you'd both be sixteen... and at that point you'd be of the age of consent *anyway*... and I think it would also be obvious to a blind *fool* that you were a couple if you're together that long... so..."

Tapping Vicky on the shoulder, Josh waited until she'd turned to face him. "Before I came over here this morning, my Mom figured out how much I like Jenn and the only thing she said to me was to go slow, enjoy it, and not let myself get hurt." Letting that sink in, he continued. "I think *your* rules are a lot *better*. Jenn and I are just *kids*!"

"I *like* Jenn." he sighed happily. "A *lot*, but I don't *want* to race ahead. I *like* how she makes me feel and don't *want* it to change, even if it's to feel *better*. She means too much to me to risk losing her by going too fast. I don't know if we'll still feel the same four years from now, I just know that right now I'd do just about *anything* just to be *near* her. I *like* how she makes me feel and how *I* make *her* feel... and that's *enough*."

Gaping at Josh, Vicky was speechless. Finally she stood and offered Josh a hand up. Kneeling down and taking him in her arms, she let go of her fears. "I see what Jenny sees in you, Jocelyn. You have a good *soul*. I could think of no one *better* for her than someone like you... boy *or* girl!"

Giving Josh a few minutes to clean and fix his face, the two headed out into the living room together. Seeing John sitting and holding Jennifer as the girl wept, the two adults looked at one another knowingly and nodded.

"*Jocelyn*? Why don't you come in the kitchen and help me make up some snacks?" Vicky said in order to give Jennifer time to compose herself. A few minutes later, John joined the two in the kitchen.

"Jenny wanted to go freshen up." he explained. "She'll be out shortly."

"Have a *good* talk?" Vicky asked as she cut up a cucumber.

"*Very* productive and with a positive *outlook*." he answered her real question in a way that would be difficult for Josh to discern.

"Same *here*." Vicky told him, glancing down at their twelve-year-old guest.

Just as the two finished making up a vegetable tray, Josh spotted Jennifer coming into the kitchen. Her eyes were as bloodshot from crying as his own, but inside them was a light that shone gaily. "*Here, Jocelyn*." she offered. "You're my *guest*, let me get that for you!"

When Jennifer came in close to Josh to take the tray, their hands touched and they both froze, their eyes fixed on one another. Josh felt her fingers against his, her skin sliding ever so gently against his own hypersensitive nerves and lighting a fire in his belly like none he'd ever known. It lasted barely a second, but it burned into his memory for the rest of his life.

Later as they walked through the park, John far enough behind them to give them some privacy, they were once more holding hands.

"*So...*" Jennifer said at last, "I take it Mom talked to *you* while Dad talked to *me*?"

Josh nodded. "Your parents are *wonderful*, Jenn. They love you *so* much!"

She agreed and smiled. "*I know*. They're about as good as parents can get and still be *parents*! I mean, I can't even get my ears pierced until I'm in *High School*, and they *always* have to know where I am, who I'm with, what I'm doing... blah, blah, blah! I know they do it because they love me and care about me, but sometimes it gets to be a bit *too* much!"

"*Believe* me, Jenn!" Josh laughed. "That's *way* better than parents that don't set *any* limits or try and control your every move! I should know!"

Giggling together, they swung their hands between them playfully, their fingers intertwined. After a moment, Josh screwed up the courage to ask the question he needed to know the answer to. "*Jenn?* I... I need to know if they *know* about me... about who and *what* I am, I mean,"

Jennifer shook her head and stared at the sidewalk. "Not unless they figured it out on their *own*, they don't... or unless *you* told them. I doubt there's *any* way they could figure it out themselves, though! You're *much* too beautiful!"

Blushing, Josh turned away a moment before looking back to her. "I think I *need* to tell them. I can't *stand* lying to them, even by way of just not telling them everything. I wanted to talk to *you* about it first because... well... there's a chance they'll take it all back and we'll never be allowed to see each other again if I do. So since this doesn't just affect me, I need to see what *you* think before I decide what I'm going to do."

Terrified, she shook her head vigorously. "*No!* You *can't!* I couldn't *take* it if they made you go away! I... I *need* you too much! Can't... can't you just *wait?* That way they get *used* to you, get to know you like *I* do, and then..."

"...and then tell them that the person they *thought* I was is a *phony?*" Josh pointed out. One thing growing up in his parents' home taught him how to do well was to have an open debate. "It'd make them question *everything* they know about me and destroy the trust they put in me. They might just send me packing on that *alone*, even if they otherwise wouldn't."

"But *Joss*, if you tell them now, then we get so close, only to have no time together to *enjoy* it!" she countered. "*God!* I wish He would just tell me what to do sometimes... which path is the right one! Sometimes it's just so hard to tell!"

"I don't know *much* about Christianity, just what I heard *today*, really." Josh shook his head. "But a lot of what I heard says that Jesus wanted us to be *good* to one another, *right*? That part about 'doing unto others'? I've heard it before. It's called The Golden Rule." Seeing her nod, he continued. "It seems to me that if you *live* by that rule, you *gotta* be as honest with *them* as they are with *us*... and what your mom told me earlier was pretty darn honest, even though she didn't *want* to say it!"

"I'm *scared*!" she admitted, slowing to a stop. "*Hold* me?"

Glancing back at her father, Josh wrapped her in a warm hug. Jennifer in turn clung to the smaller boy and threatened to crush him with the ferocity of her need to be close to him. After a short time, the two sensed John moving up closer. Not angrily, but enough to be a gentle reminder of their promise to limit displays of affection in public. Separating, Josh looked over at the man whose face was a turmoil of concern, fear, anguish, and hope. Looking down and then smiling up at Jennifer, Josh started walking with her again, their hands still entwined.

Chapter 12 - Parental Guidance Suggested

Sitting in Jennifer's bedroom, the door open, and with a promise from her parents not to 'wander by' to check up on them for at least half an hour, the two sat on her bed next to one another. Before the three had returned to the Healy's home, Josh had decided that it was now or never, so he'd asked her parents for a moment of semi-privacy to talk with Jennifer alone first.

"So... um... what was it that you needed to *tell* me?" Jennifer asked quietly, smiling at what she hoped it might be. As she spoke, she ran her fingers along the back of Josh's hand.

Taking a sharp breath, Josh looked at her, his heart hammering away in his chest at her closeness and her touch. "Um... can... I *like* that, but I need to say this and I can't *think* when you do that!"

Giggling, Jennifer ceased driving him to distraction. "OK... *for now*. So what did you want to talk about?"

"*Me.*" he explained simply. Starting at the beginning, he laid out how his parents had insisted since he was five that he was gay, then how when he'd kept insisting that he wasn't gay his parents essentially forced him to accept being transgendered. They'd done nothing illegal; no law covered his exact situation. Josh had essentially acquiesced.

"*Plus*, you know... I'm *really* girly!" he laughed, making her laugh with him.

"Joss... um... *Josh*... I guess..." she asked, "I don't *care*! I like *you*! *More* than like really, I think I'm *falling* for you." She ran her fingertips along his hand again. "When I *look* at you, all I see is someone *beautiful*. Like I said, I think I fell for you that first day when you were still dressed like... um... like a *boy*, I guess. Even then, even with everyone calling you Josh and the clothes you wore, you were *still* pretty. Not handsome or cute, but... *pretty*. *Beautiful*, really! Does that make you mad?"

Closing his eyes as he reveled in the feel of her touch and her words, not even caring that being called pretty and beautiful made him feel wonderful, Josh shook his head to clear it. "Jenn? We're still just kids... and I promised your parents we wouldn't... um..."

Running her finger up his arm, raising gooseflesh as it went, she loved seeing how good she could make him feel. "The first rule was that we couldn't be alone someplace with the door closed." Looking over at the open door, she smiled. "It isn't *closed*! The second rule was no PDAs. We're not in *public*. The last rule was never anything in front of Luke. He's not *here*."

Vaguely aware that she was right, they were doing nothing directly against her parents' rules, Josh felt that they were perhaps violating the spirit of them. Looking up at her though, he couldn't think anymore.

"*Jocelyn*?" Jennifer said as she stopped and withdrew her hand. "I... um... I want my first kiss to be with *you*. Will you let me *kiss* you?"

Seeing him nod slightly, their fingers linked, she leaned in close and pressed her lips to his as their eyes closed. It was just a simple kiss, honestly no more than the kisses he used to give his parents. When he felt her soft lips against his though, and felt the emotional connection it brought with it, he found that a 'simple kiss' could mean so much more. The kiss lingered for several moments that stretched into eternity for the two. Slowly, they parted and opened their eyes once more.

As Josh stared into her gaze, he saw within the girl a need; a storming hunger for much more. It was so fierce it scared him. Trembling slightly, his voice wavered as he spoke. "That was... *really* nice. Can we go *slow*? Can *you*?"

Seeing the fear in his eyes and hearing it in his voice, Jennifer scooted back slightly. "I'm sorry! I didn't mean..." At a loss for how to apologize for terrifying him so much, guilt washed over her like a tidal wave. "Jocelyn, I won't *ever* push you for more than you're ready for, *OK*? I *promise*! I know

I wanna do more... a *lot* more... but hurting you to get it would make it *terrible*, not *wonderful*. Can you forgive me?"

Nodding as he relaxed, he looked at her kindly. "*Anytime*, Jenn! I *promise* I'll let you know when I'm ready for more." Smiling mischievously he added, "For now, can we just do that *again*?"

Like an animal that had just broken free of the chain that bound it, Jennifer kissed him again, this time letting her free hand touch his face. As the kiss once more ended, she blew out a breath. "*Wow!* You are *so* beautiful! I could do that all *day!*" Kissing him a third and much longer time, they were in the middle of it when they heard the voice behind them.

"*Jenny* dear, your fath... *Oh, God!*" Vicky gasped as she instantly regretted not knocking first.

Breaking the kiss and glancing at the clock, Jennifer saw she and Josh had five minutes left of their half-hour. "*Mom!* You *promised!* It's not *time* yet!"

Her eyes cast down at the floor, she very nearly yelled at her daughter before regaining her emotional composure. "I'm *sorry!* I'm *sorry!*" she cried. Unsure if she could ever get used to the idea of her daughter kissing another girl, she remembered all that she and John had talked about and the promise she'd made to never risk driving their daughter away. "I'll... I'll come back in a few minutes." she stammered as she blindly turned toward the door, still looking down.

"*Mom!*" Jennifer sighed exasperatedly. "Come *back!* We're done talking *anyway.*"

Stopping and slowly looking up, she was relieved to see Jennifer standing behind her and not on the bed with Josh. "Sweetheart, I *am* sorry. I lost track of the time and I wanted to let you know that your father was going to offer to drive Jocelyn home. I... I'll try to be more *careful* in the future." Smiling

weakly, she hoped Jennifer would understand. "You're just growing up so fast and... it's hard to keep *up*!"

Walking up to and hugging her mom, Jennifer sighed. "It's *fine*, Mom. Like I said, we were *done* talking."

Seeing an opportunity to both grow from the experience and at the same time break the shame threatening the two preteens, Vicky smirked. "That's not what we called it when *I* was your age!"

"*Mother!*" Jennifer gasped as she backed away from her, turning beat red.

"Oh, *Jennifer!*" she countered with a smile. "I was a child of the *eighties!* You think I never had a *boy* up in my room when I was in Middle School?" Looking over at Josh, she bit her lower lip embarrassedly. "Not that I was calling you a *boy*, Jocelyn! Far *from* it! You're a *lovely* young girl, and..." Forcing herself to say it out loud, she completed her thought. "Jenny is *very* blessed to have found you! You're *very* special!"

"You don't know the *half* of it." Josh said exasperatedly. "I was wondering if you would ask Mr. Healy in? There's something I need to tell you both and I don't think I can do it more than once."

"*Certainly*, dear." she answered softly. "I'll get him. Watch the *time*, though. You need to get home soon." Exiting calmly, she went to fetch her husband.

"*Jenn?*" Josh asked. "Can... can you sit next to me and hold my hand? This'll probably be the scariest thing I've ever done. I don't think I can *do* it alone."

Nodding with a smile, she sat next to him and put her hand in his again, giving it a squeeze before giving him a peck on the cheek. "For *luck!*"

Staring into each other's eyes, they heard Vicky and John coming this time and scooted slightly apart, though still holding hands. As her parents came

in, Vicky took a seat at the desk chair while John stood behind her and held her shoulders to comfort her.

"*Jocelyn*, dear." Vicky said with a blush as she handed him a tissue, "You have... um... Jenny's *lipstick*... on your *cheek*."

Quickly rubbing it off with the kleenex, Josh turned red and looked up at the two. "*Sorry*. Um... I wanted to tell you that you two have been nicer to me than even my *own* parents. They *love* me, I know that, but sometimes they get so caught up in doing what *other* people tell them is the right thing to do they get carried away... and I kinda just get swept along with their ideas... like I'm some *science* experiment or something."

"I need to tell you something because you two have been *so* nice... I just *can't* let today end without you knowing." he said as he looked them each in the eye in turn. "You trusted me to be honest, but there's something about me that I've kept from you. I convinced myself it was just my own business, but I want you two to *never* doubt my honesty, so I *need* to tell you."

Vicky faced up toward John who nodded his assent to let her speak for them both. "*Jocelyn*, you don't have to share your private matters for us to trust you, dear! You're an *honest* girl and we..."

"*Boy*." Josh interrupted in correction.

"Pardon?" Vicky said confusedly.

"You said honest *girl*. That's *wrong*. I'm an honest *boy*."

Looking at him carefully, she couldn't make the words make sense. "Um... you think you're like a boy? Is that because you like other girls?"

Sighing, he let it all out. "No, I mean I *am* a boy. My parents are convinced that I'm transgendered... that I want to be a girl... so they *forced* me to accept

the idea. They took away all my boy clothes, are changing my name, and I'm sure that pretty soon they'll try to put me on hormone blockers so that I don't grow into a man. I don't *think* I'm a girl. I'm *pretty* sure I'm a boy. I just *act* like a girl a lot, so they think that means I want to *be* one."

Gaping at the boy in horror at the idea, Vicky shook her head in stunned disbelief. "No. No, I can't *believe* you! *No* parent would do that to their own child! You're *lying*!"

Shaking his head, he looked down at the floor between them. "I wish I *were*. Lying would be *easier*. For seven years they thought I was gay. They sent me to a summer camp for gay boys. I *fought* 'em. I argued, denied, yelled, cried, and did everything short of *marry* a girl to prove to 'em I wasn't gay, but they wouldn't *listen*. Then, just before this summer vacation ended, they told me they think I'm transgender and want to be a girl. I *tried* to fight it, but when they took away all my boy clothes, I had no choice. So I gave up. I *let* them treat me like a girl. I even tried to *like* it... but I *can't*. I'm a *boy*."

Seeing his hangdog look, the two looked at their daughter. "Jenny?" Vicky asked gently. "Did you *know* this?"

At first shaking her head, she then shrugged. "*Some* of it." she admitted. "I knew she used to be a boy. She dressed like one the first day of school, but even *then* she looked like a girl wearing boy clothes. I didn't know it wasn't her choice until today, though. *That's* what she wanted to talk to me about after our walk with Daddy."

Vicky slowly sat up. "You mean, you *knew* that..." She struggled with the idea for a moment before continuing. "...that he was a *boy*... when I came in? When you were..."

"*Kissing*?" Jennifer finished for her. "Yeah. It's sorta weird. Even knowing Jocelyn's a boy, I don't really *care*. I just like her *so* much!"

Taking a moment, the two parents stepped outside the bedroom door to discuss the issue in whispers. Meanwhile, Josh felt Jennifer lay her head on his shoulder.

"I don't think they're mad." she said softly. "I just wish I knew what they were gonna *do*." As the two returned to the room, Jennifer sat back up.

"*Jenny?*" Vicky said sweetly. "Would you wait in the living room, please? We need to talk to... um... *Jocelyn*... alone."

Squeezing his hand, the young girl got up and left. Josh then looked at them nervously. "You can call me Josh, if you want. That's my *real* name."

Taking it slowly, Vicky sighed. "OK then... *Josh*... we first wanted to say we're *glad* you felt you could confide in us. It tells us that the trust we have in you was well placed. Knowing this actually makes things *easier* for John and I to accept. But..." She paused, trying to figure out the right words.

Josh's heart sank. "...but you don't want me to be around Jenn anymore? I was kinda *expecting* that."

"That's *not* what I was going to say!" she admonished. "What I was *going* to say was that we'd like to help. We don't understand all this, but John and I feel that you're a gift from *God*. You're a *boy*, but Jenny *likes* you... and that's *good*! We can accept that Jenny likes other girls, we have no *choice*, but we didn't want her to have to face a world that would be so *hard* on her. A world that would drive her away from her faith and deny her so much of what life has to offer just because she's... *different*. Her liking you, and you wanting to be a boy, means she doesn't *have* to face so much hardship."

Taking it all in, Josh nodded. "So... how do you think you can help?"

"We'd like to talk to your parents." John stated. "We think we can help you make them see that being a girl isn't what *you* want."

Josh almost laughed. "*Seriously?* You think they'd listen to *you?*"

"We can *try*." Vicky said with a smile.

Shaking his head, Josh exhaled in futility. "It's no good. I already gave in and *told* them they were right. They won't *believe* you." Taking a breath he looked up at them. "Can you give me some time to work on them? *Believe* me, I *want* you to help, but if you just show up today and try to tell them I'm really a boy, it'll be no good. They'll just get mad and say I can't be around you or Jenn anymore. That you all are bad for my 'self identity' or that you're just being 'preachy and close-minded' or some junk like that."

"We still need to *meet* them... *Josh*." Vicky struggled with the name, having a difficult time putting it on the 'obvious girl' seated on her daughter's bed.

"Would you mind if we drove you home?"

"Sure." he said with a weak smile. "Just don't mention God, church, or me really wanting to be a boy... for now. *Please?* Just give me a chance to work them up to it?"

The two looked at one another and nodded. "Alright, dear. We'll be patient, but you can't take *forever*. We'll give you a few weeks, but then we really should talk to them. Do you want us to call you *Jocelyn* until then?"

"*Please?*" he asked. "Just around them? Or you can call me *Joss*. That's what my friend Trace... I mean, *Tracy*... calls me. It's pretty *close* to Josh!"

Smiling at him as Vicky stood up, she helped him to stand as well. "Well then... *Joss*, why don't we go ahead and drive you home?"

Sitting in the back seat of the minivan, Josh held Jennifer's hand and watched her looking at him with a worried expression. He'd already called home and warned his parents to expect company. "It'll be *OK*, Jenn." he tried to calm her fears. "They're not *ogres*... just... *misguided*."

Jennifer giggled at that and Josh was happy to see her smile. Pulling along the curb in front of his home, Vicky got out and opened the side door for the two preteens, the girl having already begged to let her go in with him.

While the three walked up the flagstone walkway toward Josh's front door, Jennifer squeezed his hand so tight he felt she might crush it. Reaching the door, he opened it with his free hand. "Come on in." he invited Jennifer and her mother. "*Mom! Daddy! We're here!*" he shouted as the three stepped into the living room.

Melanie came out of the master bedroom and smiled at Josh and his guests. "Welcome *home*, sweetheart!" she said as she walked up to him and gave him a quick hug. "You must be *Vicky!*" she said as she looked at the woman. "And *you* must be *Jennifer!*" she said, at last shaking the girl's hand. "*Please! Make yourselves at home!*" she gestured to the sofa.

"We can't stay." Vicky said regretfully. "My husband John and our son Luke are waiting in the car. I just thought it best if we actually *met*, seeing as how well the... *girls...* are getting on." She looked at Josh and Jennifer holding hands.

Smiling weakly, Melanie looked at the two. "I take it then that today was a... *pleasant* day?" she addressed Josh, gently probing to see if he was hurt in any way. Seeing the blush on his and Jennifer's cheeks, and the happy nod from him, told her all she wanted to know.

"Can I show Jenn my room before they go, Mom?" Josh asked sweetly. "I want to show her my movie posters!"

"Make it quick." Melanie said as Fred joined them while the two children ran up the stairs.

"*Jocelyn...*" Vicky said carefully, trying her best to keep up appearances as she promised, "...was an *angel!* Always polite and honest, about *everything.*"

She emphasized her words with a pointed look to show that she knew about Josh.

Tilting her head slightly, she looked in the other woman's eyes and saw kind understanding. "And you're *OK* with them seeing each other?"

"Jenny isn't allowed to *date* yet, Mrs. Ryan..."

"*Please*, call me Melanie... or just *Mel*! By the way, this is Jocelyn's father, Fred."

Nodding to him, Vicky flustered as she tried to continue. "As I was *saying*, Jenny isn't really *allowed* to date yet, but we... that is, *John* and I... we think it would be OK for the... the *girls*... to see each other socially. Even in just these past few days, they're already *very* close."

Melanie furrowed her brow at the other woman. "I take it that you're not *thrilled* that your daughter likes our daughter? It's not like they have a *choice* in the matter..."

"*Oh! I know!*" Vicky interrupted. "I actually think that Jocelyn could be just about the *best* person, boy *or* girl, for my Jenny to have feelings for! She's *such* a wonderful child! Polite, honest, and *very* up-front. She... she *insisted* that she tell us she used to be... well... a *boy*."

"She didn't used to be a boy." Fred argued the point. "She was *always* a girl. We just... well... we didn't understand that until recently."

Vicky was starting to see what Josh had tried to tell her about his parents. "I... I'm sorry. I *put* that badly. This is all *new* to me."

Melanie's expression softened. "It's alright. We see you're *trying* and not judging, *that's* what matters! As far as *we're* concerned, Jocelyn is free to date anyone she likes. It's not like we could *stop* them, right? They'd just do

it behind our backs, anyway. I just want her to be careful and take all of the appropriate precautions. We don't want her to get *hurt*."

Nodding as she swallowed hard, Vicky was overwhelmed by the need to go before she said something she'd regret.

Leading Jennifer into his room, Josh stopped in the middle and gestured to his prized movie posters. "*See? Aren't they...*" Just as he turned to face her, Jennifer cupped his face in her hands and kissed him, this time much more sure of herself and more full of passion than the earlier kisses.

Josh could only relax into the moment and let her kiss him, relishing it.

Enjoying the feel of his lips and the warmth of him next to her, Jennifer at last languidly backed off and breathed heavily. "*Sorry. I.. I don't know what came over me. I just... I needed to do that!*" she apologized as her hands ran down the arms of Josh's blouse, then linked her fingers in his. "*Show me!*" she said happily, turning to see the posters.

Overcome, Josh was stupefied for a moment before his brain started to work again. "Um... oh. Oh *yeah!* Uh, *this* one was... um... the *first* one I found." he sputtered as he indicated the poster for *West Side Story*.

Explaining where and how he found it, Jennifer came around behind him, her arms wrapping around his chest and her chin resting on his left shoulder as she pressed her cheek against his. Sighing contentedly, she listened as he slowly stammered through the story. After a minute, the two heard Jennifer's mother calling from downstairs.

"*Jenny!* We need to *go*, dear!"

Turning him abruptly, Jennifer kissed him on the lips once more, this time quickly, but much more aggressively and with an almost pained expression. "Oh, *Jocelyn!* I wish I *never* had to leave you ever *again!*" she nearly cried.

Hugging his girlfriend to help ease her upset, he let go and took her by the hand, heading out of the bedroom and down the stairs. "We'll see each other tomorrow at school! I'm gonna see if my parents will let me come over for 'Sunday brunch' again." he winked at her. "I wanna hear more of what I heard *today!*"

"What's *that*, princess?" Fred asked curiously.

"Oh, just talking before brunch." he answered vaguely. "Can I go? *Please?*"

"*Jocelyn*, you don't need to ask our *permission!*" Melanie smiled. "Your father and I got a chance to talk with Vicky and we so no reason why you shouldn't be free to go over there any time you *like!* We'll get you a city bus pass so it'll be *easier*. OK? And Jennifer? You're free to make yourself at home here anytime *you like!*"

"We *really* do have to go." Vicky said as she started moving toward the door. "I'm *sorry* I don't have more time to sit and *really* talk, but John and my son are outside waiting!"

Josh hugged Jennifer warmly and slowly. "See you at school, Jenn!"

Reveling in his embrace, Jennifer hummed contentedly. "See you tomorrow!" Pulling themselves apart, she backed away towards her mother waiting at the door; her eyes never leaving Josh's return gaze. "Bye... *Jocelyn!*"

"Bye... *Jennifer!*" After the two parted, Josh collapsed onto the couch with a dreamy look on his face. "I *love* the way she says my name!"

Fred came up behind Melanie, wrapping his arms around her stomach, unknowingly mimicking what Jennifer had just done with Josh upstairs. Smiling down on their child, they waited for him to come out of his haze before saying anything.

Sitting up, feeling the vacant hole in his heart that Jennifer had left, he looked up at them. "*What?*"

The two laughed as Melanie slipped in to sit next to him. "We're just *happy* for you, sweetheart! Jennifer seems like a *wonderful* girl! It's *obvious* she's attracted to you, too! I'm surprised you two came down so quickly after her mother *called* for her!"

"*Mom!*" Josh whined. "We're just *kids!* We weren't up there making out! *Yes, I like* her... a *lot...* and she likes *me...* maybe more than I like *her,* but I told her I want to go *slow.* So no making out in my room!"

Melanie shook her head dismissively. "Make any rules you want, sweetheart. Just know that they're *your* rules and you can change them anytime you see fit. Just make sure you close your door. I'll have your father put a lock on it tomorrow while you're at school, so you can have all the privacy you need."

Sighing, Josh was finding himself wishing his parents would set boundaries for him for once. *It's like they don't even care what happens to me!*

"Come *on,* lover girl!" Melanie said as she helped him to his feet. "Let's have dinner and you can tell us all about your day!"

Walking with his parents into the dining room, he knew one thing he wasn't going to tell them about. *Well, that and the kisses!* he thought with a smile.

Chapter 13 - Young Love

The next morning Josh cheerfully made his way toward the bus stop. It was a beautiful late summer day, so he'd worn one of the skirts that used to belong to Tracy and one of the tops Melanie had gotten him. When he saw his best friend at the stop, he smiled wide and jogged forward to greet her.

"Hey, Trace! Glad to see you feeling better!"

"Thanks, Joss!" she grinned back. "I'm just glad I'm not in *bed* anymore!"

The two giggled together as they waited for the bus.

"So, what did *you* do this weekend while I was *dying*?" Tracy dramatically asked. "You never called or *anything*. I *missed* you!"

Feeling bad that he'd almost completely ignored his best friend while she was sick, he looked away. "I... uh... I went over to *Jenn's* house on Sunday."

Her smile melting, Tracy turned away as well. "*Oh*. I guess *she's* your best friend now."

"*No!*" Josh insisted as he moved to make the girl look at him. "She's... um..." Glancing back at the other kids, he took her by the arm and led her a short distance away. "She's sorta... maybe my... um... *girlfriend*? A little?"

Tracy slowly looked up at him with an astonished expression. "Your... *Joss!* You *have* to tell me *everything!*"

Recounting his weekend, it took all the way until the bus got to the school before he finished.

"So, as soon as she came in my room, she *kissed* me... *again!*"

"And her parents are totally cool with you? I mean, that you're still physically a boy and that she's dating you as a *girl*?"

Josh shrugged as they waited for the vehicle to stop. "Like I said, I told them *everything*. They think I'm pretty cool!"

"You are *so* lucky!" she replied as they got up to file out the door. "Mom and Dad won't let me date until *next* year!"

"We're not *really* dating." Josh admitted as they started moving. "I mean, I just went over to her house is all. I do that with *you*!"

"But you don't *kiss* me!" Tracy pointed out as they stepped off the bus. "And you're going to go to her birthday party... and you're making plans *months* in advance... and you *still* wanna say you aren't... um... *Joss*?"

He wasn't listening anymore as he watched Jennifer ride her bike up to the racks and push it in. Unlocking the chain, she threaded it around her tire and frame before locking it again. It seemed like every move she made was meant to catch his attention, even though he knew she hadn't seen him yet.

"Oh, *brother*!" Tracy sighed. "You've got it *bad*! Way worse than Brenda! *Hello*! *Joss*!?"

"*Huh*?" he asked as he tore his eyes away from Jennifer to look at Tracy.

"Never mind!" Tracy giggled. Pointing toward his girlfriend, she smiled. "Go! I'll see you in first period!"

Walking over to the girl he'd spent the previous day with, his heart leapt for joy at the elated expression on her face when she saw him.

"*Jocelyn*!" she said as they jogged up to one another. Stopping herself from wrapping him in her arms and kissing him deeply right there in front of

everybody like she wanted to, Jennifer swallowed hard and stopped short. "Um... *hi!*"

"*Hi!*" Josh said with a stupid grin. "Walk in together?"

"*Sure!*" she said with a blush. The two making their way to the doors into the building, she tucked her hair nervously behind her ear. "Oh... I suppose I can just *give* you this now!" she said as she reached into her pocket and pulled out a note. It was the same paper used for the notes left in his locker.

"That was *you?*" he asked. "Why didn't you *tell* me?"

Walking the halls towards Jennifer's locker, she explained. "Well, at first I didn't know if you'd *like* me or not, so I didn't want to spoil it if you *didn't*. Then after I knew you *did*, I wasn't thinking about it anymore." Blushing, she stopped in front of her locker. "Um... this one's... *different*." she admitted shyly as she put in her combination.

Opening the note, his eyes bulged as he began to read. "A... a *love* letter?"

Nodding, she put away some of her books and closed the door. "Don't read it *here!*" she whispered. "Wait to read it when you go to *bed* tonight!"

Giggling as he re-folded the note and pushed it into the front pocket of his jean skirt, he started towards his locker. "So... wanna have lunch together? I usually eat with Trace... my best friend? Tracy *Edwards*? She says she knows you from your last school."

Thinking hard, her face lit up. "*Oh!* I remember her! The one with the twin brother? He called me a 'stupid girl' all the time, so I sorta ignored them."

"Dave can be a bit of a jerk, especially to *girls*." Josh admitted. "He figured out he's gay pretty early. He's liked other boys since *Kindergarten*."

She stopped in mid-step and lowered her voice. "He's *gay!*"

Blinking at her shock, he stared at her a moment. "Yeah. *So?*"

Thinking about it briefly, she resumed walking with him. "I... I just never knew a *gay kid*, is all."

"Aren't *you* gay?" Josh asked her pointedly. "I mean, it's what your *mom* said... and you like me because I'm *pretty*. *Beautiful* you said, though I beg to differ. Plus there was..." Halting his tongue as he realized he was about to bring up a painful subject she hadn't told him about, he turned away.

"There was wha..." she stopped cold again. Her eyes widening, she looked at him as though he'd read her mind. "How do *you* know about her?" she asked softly.

Moving closer, he took her hand and started moving. "Your mom told me that a girl broke your heart last year. She didn't tell me anything more than that, I *swear!* She only told me because she needed me to understand how *hurt* you were afterwards... and how easily *I* could hurt you."

Walking along, being blindly led by Josh, Jennifer swallowed. "Her name was Janice. She... she used to be my best friend. Then I told her I *liked* her. She called me bad names and never spoke to me again."

"I guess that's why you were so afraid to tell *me* you liked me." Josh said rhetorically as he put in his combination.

"I guess I *am* gay." she admitted quietly to herself, just coming to accept the idea. Puzzled a moment, she considered that. "Or *am* I? I like *you* and you're really a *boy* inside... and *outside*... just not... oh, *you* know what I mean!"

"But for a boy I'm *really* girly." he admitted in counterpoint. "And I *look* like a girl, even in boy clothes. You said so yourself."

Sighing, she nodded as she clutched her school binder to her chest. "I *guess* so, but is it really gay if you like a boy that looks like a girl?" Realizing the ridiculousness of the question, the two looked at each other and giggled. "What's your first class?" she asked.

"Home Ec." he explained.

"*Really? You sure you're not really a girl?*"

Hearing the warning bell, the two started to back away from one another toward their respective classes. "We'll talk at lunch! Look for me?"

Jennifer nodded happily. "See you then!"

By the time Josh got to class and settled into his desk, he looked over toward Tracy who was grinning like the cat that ate the canary and glancing back at him sideways. Then she started mouthing, "Jocelyn and Jennifer, sittin' in a tree..."

Josh widened his eyes in pleading for her to stop before someone noticed and was grateful when the tardy bell rang and class began at last.

The rest of the morning went by smoothly. Josh still had trouble focusing in History class, but now it was because his mind kept drifting off into fanciful images of Jennifer smothering him in kisses. When the bell rang for lunch, he was startled back to reality and quickly grabbed his things and caught up with Tracy.

"Oh, so you decided to join the land of the *living*?" she needled him.

"*Trace! Please!* Don't tell anyone about Jenn and me. OK?"

"I won't, but it's an *awful* hardship, keeping a secret like this!" Tracy joked. "What'll you *give* me?"

"Not a black *eye!*" he jokingly threatened her. "*Please, Trace? I trusted you! You have to keep it a secret!*"

"*Alright!*" she gave in. "I was just *kidding!* Don't *whine!*"

Reaching their lockers, Josh saw David already at his. "*Hey, Dave. Glad to see you back! I didn't get a chance to say hi this morning.*"

David turned around and then looked at the floor. "*Oh. Hey, Joss. Sorry. Just busy talkin' with the guys. Look, I'll catch you later, K? Bye.*" At that, he turned away with his lunch and walked off, not even giving Josh a chance to say anything more.

"Don't pay any attention to him, Joss." Tracy comforted as she opened her locker. "He's just weirded out by you being a *girl*, is all. He'll get used to it!"

After Josh got his lunch and the two sat down in the lunchroom, Josh was once again surprised by a voice from behind him, this time pleasantly so.

"Is this seat taken?" Jennifer asked, sitting on the opposite side of him from Tracy.

Smiling, Josh played along. "I'm afraid so. It's reserved for this *really* nice girl who thinks I'm the *living end!*"

Continuing the banter, Jennifer giggled. "Well, too bad for her, because *I'm* gonna sit in it, just to make sure nobody *else* can! Otherwise some *boy* might wander over and try to talk to a pretty girl like you!" Seeing Tracy sitting uncomfortably on his other side, Jennifer got serious. "Hi, Tracy."

"*Hi.*" was all the girl said back.

Now feeling like a boxing referee, he wanted the two to at least get along. "*Trace? Jenn was telling me that she kind of avoided you at your old school*

'cuz Dave was mean to her sometimes, so she musta thought you would be, too. I'm *sure* she wouldn't ignore you for no reason."

Sighing, Tracy looked across him at the girl on his left. "I'm sorry about my dufus of a brother, Jenny. He can be a real *jerk*, sometimes. He just now sorta blew off Joss, even after she went to bat for him to make sure he didn't fall behind in his classes."

"It's OK, Tracy." she answered back. "I guess I shouldn't have judged *you* because of what *he* did. I was just... sorta... *afraid* of you... I guess... but you can't be *that* bad if *Jocelyn* likes you."

Tracy giggled at the way Jennifer had said her best friend's name. "*Wow*, you two really *must* be in love, the way you said, *Jocelyn* just now!" Seeing the other girl look down embarrassedly, Tracy backed off. "*Really* though, I think it's sweet! I'm *glad* that Joss found someone that likes her for who she really is. She's a pretty great girl!"

Looking at Josh with a confused expression, Jennifer saw him shake his head, she decided that the conversation could wait until later. Once they were done eating, the three took a walk around the school playground.

"So, after you left, Mom told me I can basically do whatever I want. She seems to think you and I are gonna start having *sex* like any *day* now or something! Your parents are *way* better! Mine are like, no-limits *crazy*!"

"*You're* crazy Joss!" Tracy shook her head. "Your parents are *totally cool*! If I even *thought* about having a boy in my room alone, Mom'd skin me alive! And here *you* are, complaining about being allowed to do basically whatever you want?"

Jennifer just shrugged. "I get it. Jocelyn wants to feel like her Mom and Dad care enough to set boundaries. We talked about it in our church camp last year. Limiting what kids do shows them that their parents *care* what happens

to them. Look what happens when kids *have* no limits, like in the inner cities and stuff. They keep pushing the limits of what they can do, and when no one stops them they run wild and end up hurting or *killing* themselves."

"Oh, come *on!*" Tracy rolled her eyes. "You act like the whole solution to gangs and stuff is just to have their parents tell them what they can't do! It's not *that* easy!"

Josh decided to play adjudicator to their debate. "Trace has a point. The solution *must* be complicated, or else there wouldn't *be* a problem."

"It takes more than just *setting* rules." Jennifer sighed. "Someone's gotta *enforce* 'em. That means someone has to be at home to do that. A lot of inner city kids either have both parents at work or only one parent, so no one's there to enforce the rules."

Nodding in agreement, Josh was proud of Jennifer. "Fair point, Jenn. A rule that isn't enforced isn't a *rule*... it's a *guideline*. Counterpoint, Trace?"

Tracy stopped and looked at her friend. "What are you doing? Mediating a *debate*? We're just *talking*! You *know* I hate it when you do this!"

He blinked at her, then glanced at Jennifer who appeared equally confused. "I was just playing adjudicator. You two *started* the debate. What's wrong? I thought it was *fun*! You both made points off each other and we were really *getting* somewhere!" Looking at the two blank stares directed at him, he shrugged. "*What?*"

Turning to Tracy, Jennifer asked, "Does she do this all the time?"

"*Yes!*" Tracy scoffed. "Drives me *nuts*! She won't take a side! She tries to be 'neutral arbiter' every time! She did it all the *time* with Davie and me! I swear, getting an opinion out of her is like pulling *teeth*!"

Embarrassedly, Josh looked at his shoes. "*Sorry*. I can't *help* it. Daddy does it all the time with Mom and me. I guess I just picked it up from him."

Jennifer softened her expression towards him. "*I'm* sorry, Jocelyn. I didn't mean to make you feel bad! Don't be *sad*!" She instinctually reached out and took his hand, lacing her fingers into his.

Glancing around, Josh spoke softly. "Um... *Jenn*? We *promised*. Rule two?"

Gazing achingly into his eyes, she slowly released his hand. "I know. It's harder than I *thought*, though. I just wanted you to not be sad anymore!"

"What's 'Rule two'?" Tracy asked confusedly.

"No PDAs." Josh explained. "It's a condition Jenn's parents set in order for us to see each other. Rule one is we can never be totally alone, like in a room by ourselves with the door closed? Rule three is that her brother Luke can't know we're a... a couple. Not for a few years, anyway."

Hearing the bell ending lunch, the three made their way back inside. "So what? That means you can kiss her, but only in front of her parents?"

Giggling, Josh shook his head. "That was an *accident*!"

Jennifer stopped and looked at him in shock. "You *told* her about that?"

"Um... no." Josh admitted truthfully, having skipped that part when he told Tracy about Sunday. "I... that just sorta slipped out!"

"Told me *what*?" Tracy asked curiously. "Did I *miss* something? *Joss*! Did you kiss her in front of her *parents*?" she whispered.

He looked at Jennifer who had turned beat red as he mouthed, "Sorry!" Moving close in as they resumed their walk to the lockers, Josh apologized

profusely. "I am *so* sorry, Jenn! I can't believe I *said* that! *Forgive* me? Please?"

Rolling her eyes, she giggled. "You *know* I can't stay mad at you, Jocelyn! I *like* you too much!"

The two telling Tracy the whole story as they got their things from their lockers, he turned at last to Jennifer. "See you after school?"

Blushing and biting her lower lip, she nodded. "Sure! Meet me at the bike racks! *Bye!*"

Sighing wistfully as Jennifer departed, Josh turned to Tracy. "*Trace?* Will you..."

"...save you a seat on the bus?" she finished for him. "Yeah, yeah. Sure. *Jeez!* You can't be away from her for more than a few hours? You are *definitely* in love, girlfriend!"

After classes, he did as promised and met her at her bike. When he saw her coming, he took a moment to straighten out his skirt. "Jenn! I *missed* you!"

"I missed you *too!*" she glowed as she walked up. "Look, can you come over to my house tomorrow after school? I just want to be able to spend some time with you and I can't wait all the way until Sunday."

Smiling, Josh stared into her eyes. "*Sure!* I'd *love* to!" Glancing at Tracy leaning out the bus window, his smile melted. "I gotta go or I'll miss the bus. See you *tomorrow?*"

"*Tomorrow!*" she grinned as she unlocked her bike. "Call me tonight?"

"I *will!*" he smiled at her as he ran for the bus.

Sitting in his seat after a glare from Ms. Cartwright, he let out a sigh.

"Thought for a minute there she was gonna *kiss* you!" Tracy teased. "You two are *hopeless*!"

"*Good!*" he countered. "I don't *wanna* be saved from this!"

The next day went much the same, but when school ended, Josh didn't have Tracy save him a seat. Waiting by the bikes, he noticed that Jenn's wasn't there. He knew she was at school, he'd seen her at lunch. A moment later he saw her approaching.

"Ready to go?" she said dreamily.

"Where's your bike?" he asked as they began to walk together.

"I *walked* today. I knew you wouldn't have a bike, so I thought it wouldn't be fair of me to use *mine*."

"Oh." he smiled as his black skirt blew in the light breeze, making him thankful of the heavy tights. "You're *wonderful!*"

"No, *you're* wonderful!" Jennifer sighed. "I wish we were *home* already. Luke doesn't get home until after four 'cuz he has an after-school thing he goes to that helps with his homework. He got in trouble last year for bad grades and almost got left back, so Mom signed him up for it this year so he doesn't fall behind again. He goes *every* Tuesday and Thursday."

Josh blushed. "So... that means... it'll just be us and your mom at home?"

"Uh-*huh!*" Jennifer acknowledged. "Just *us...* and I study in my *room!*"

"With the door *open*, right?" he asked cautiously.

"*Right.*" she conceded with an exasperated sigh. "Maybe *someday...*"

When the two arrived at the Healy residence, Vicky met them at the door. "Hi... um... *Josh!*" she said as she ushered the two inside. "You two want a snack?"

"No thanks, Mom." she answered heading directly for her room. "We wanna get right to it so we get *done* sooner!"

Josh looked up at her and stopped. "Thank you for calling me Josh, but you might want to just call me Joss so no one catches on. Can you bring us a snack so we can work and eat?"

Smiling as Vicky tried to see the boy in the girl before her, she gave up and nodded. "We don't *usually* allow the kids to have food in their rooms, but I think I can make an exception! You're a good g... *boy*, Jocelyn... *Joss! Sorry!* I'll bring it in a few minutes, OK?"

"*Thanks, Vicky!*" he stated gratefully. "For *everything!*" Going down the hallway, he turned in to Jennifer's room, and felt her grab his hand to drag him in and around the corner from the door. Hearing noises of Vicky making snacks from the kitchen, Jennifer drew him in close and kissed him strongly for over a minute.

"I didn't think I could *wait* any longer!" she said breathlessly as she ended the kiss and just held him tightly. "I just miss you *so* much!"

Holding her as well, he relaxed into the comfort of her. "I missed you, *too.*" After another moment, he pulled away. "But we *really* should get to work!"

Even though they were in different classes, the curriculum was standardized, so their core classes had the same worksheets and homework assignments. While Jennifer sprawled out on her bed, Josh set up at her desk just as Vicky came in.

"I just made you two a quick sandwich and got you a few fig newtons." she said as she put the plate on the desk. Looking at Jennifer and seeing her a little embarrassed, she sighed and shook her head as she gestured for Jennifer to get up. "Come *here*, sweetheart." Taking her daughter into her arms, she rocked her gently and ran her fingers through Jennifer's hair. "You don't need to be *embarrassed*, dear. I understand." Releasing her and looking to see that she was better, Vicky sighed and backed out of the room. "Just... don't close the *door*."

"We *promised*." Jennifer said. "I love you, Mom!"

"*Love* you, sweetie!" Vicky said as she turned down the hall toward the living room. A moment later, the two heard music that was loud enough to make eavesdropping impossible.

Josh tapped her on the shoulder, making the girl jump. "Sorry, didn't mean to *scare* you. Is she *testing* you?"

"I *think* so." Jennifer said as she turned and hugged him. "I wanna just sit and make out... but..."

"...we should get to *work*." he said with a smile as he leaned his forehead in to touch hers.

Forty minutes later, almost an hour before Luke was due to get home, the two came out of her room, Jennifer carrying the empty plate into the kitchen where her mother was beginning to make dinner. "Here, Mom." she rinsed the plate and put it in the dishwasher. "*Thanks*."

"You two done already?" she asked, skeptical that they'd even begun.

"Yeah. We're *done*!" she answered as she leaned against the counter.

"Not a lot to *do* today?" she asked.

"About average." he daughter answered with a slight hint of a smile.

Looking over at Josh, she peered into his eyes and saw no signs of any embarrassment or that they'd done anything other than homework. Sighing, she shook her head. "Well, your brother won't be home for another hour. Why don't you go play in your room until then? Joss? Did you want to stay for dinner? We're having a roast. You're welcome to stay!"

Blushing, he nodded. "I'd *like* that, Vicky!" he said shyly. "*Thank you!*"

Turning and walking up to him, she leaned down to his eye level. "No, thank *you...* for making me feel better that we made the right *decision* about you!" Hugging him quickly, she let him go and returned to the kitchen to resume cutting vegetables. "Fifty-eight minutes!" she said simply.

"Come *on*, Jocelyn." Jennifer said as she took his hand. "You can tell me all about *West Side Story!*"

Pulling him into her room, he was about to start explaining the story when her lips got in the way.

A little more than fifty minutes later, Vicky knocked gently on the open doorway while she still stood around the corner of the door. "Your brother will be home shortly." she gently reminded them.

"You can come *in* Mom!" Jennifer giggled.

Seeing they were not at all disheveled, she smiled at the two. "So... *West Side Story*, huh?"

"*Yeah.*" Josh blushed. "It's my *favorite* movie! I have an original movie poster for it, the soundtrack on CD, and Special Limited Edition DVD of the movie I got for my eleventh birthday!"

Looking at Jennifer, she smiled slyly. "So, what did *you* think of the story?"

Getting her own sly grin, she answered, "It's basically just *Romeo and Juliet* set in the 50s in the New York slums, but I still can't wait to see it! It won *ten* Academy Awards, so it *must* be pretty good!"

The Healy family sat down for dinner, Josh sitting between Jennifer and Vicky. He was about to start eating when he saw them all bow their heads. Pausing, he watched as they prayed together as a family.

"Lord," John began, "may we be truly thankful for the food we are about to receive and all your other blessings. In the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen."

He listened as the rest of the family echoed the closing and looked up.

"Well, dig *in!*" John said with a smile.

As the family plus one began to eat, Vicky turned to Josh. "*Jocelyn*, did your mother say anything when you called to ask to stay for dinner?"

Shaking his head as he finished his first bite of roast, he swallowed and took a breath. "Nothing *really*, Vicky. Just to have fun and be home by bedtime, is all. They're having veggie-burgers tonight."

John looked up. "Are they *vegetarians*?" he asked curiously.

"Not *really*," he answered. "They try to avoid meat, but they aren't *strict* about it. They let me eat bologna sandwiches for lunch, and I sometimes make myself an egg salad sandwich, but we only have soy milk at home and this is the first time I've ever had a roast. It's *really* good, Vicky!"

Luke instantly changed the subject. "How come *she* gets to call Momma 'Vicky'? *She* aren't a grownup!"

"*Isn't.*" his mother corrected him. "And she can call me that because I *said* she could. Now eat your asparagus, young man."

"*Blech!*" he said, sticking out his tongue. Before she could reprimand him though, he picked up a spear with his fork. "Yes, Momma."

Giggling at his plight, Josh and Jennifer each took a bite of their own.

When Vicky drove Josh home that night, Jennifer seated beside him in the back seat of their sedan, the two held hands and stared into each other's eyes the whole way. She tried to make small talk with the two, but soon realized after having to repeat herself over and over that they weren't listening and just drove in silence. When at last they reached his home, Jennifer got out and held the door for Josh.

"May I walk Joss to the door, Mom?" she pleaded.

Sighing, she nodded. "Hurry *back*, sweetie. I'll be waiting."

The two held hands as they headed up the flagstones. "I miss you *already.*" Jennifer complained.

Giggling gently, he noticed that his parents hadn't remembered to turn on the porch light and it was very nearly completely dark out. "I had a *really* good time, Jenn! I *love* spending time with your family! They're *so* nice!"

"*Thanks!*" she said, wishing she could return the compliment. "So... same thing on Thursday?" she asked.

"*Sure!* But I'm really looking forward to this *Sunday* again!"

Reaching the door, and barely able to make out her mother's car, she leaned in close. "Can I kiss you goodnight?"

Nodding, he relaxed into the moment and enjoyed the brief kiss, using it to sustain him for the next few days.

Releasing each other, Josh opened his front door and turned on the porch light, so Jennifer could see to walk back. "Goodnight, *Jennifer!*" he said as he leaned on the doorframe and watched her back away.

"Goodnight, *Joss!*" she grinned and turned to skip down the path back to her mother.

Watching her get in the front seat and then seeing the car drive away, he sighed wistfully and entered his open-door prison.

Chapter 14 - The Birthday Party

Looking himself over one last time, he nodded with resigned satisfaction. The blue satin dress looked good on him, flattering his natural curves and making him appear to be every bit the pre-teen girl he was made to become. His visits with Jennifer and the Healy family and to their church over the past two weeks had been blissful reprieves from his home life. While his parents were happy to have him come and go as he pleased, when he *was* home he'd had to endure a new round of pushing from his parents.

They were insisting he let them take him to their family doctor to put him on hormone blockers.

He did everything he could think of to put off their 'helpful' pressuring, but only the day before he'd resorted to his last line of defense.

"I'm not sure I want to be a girl forever, Mom."

"What?" she asked incredulously. "Now where is all this coming from? Is this your girlfriend's influence?"

"No!" Josh denied. "She thinks I'm beautiful, and pretty, and loves me as a girl! Vicky's known she's liked girls for over a year now!"

"So what's this all about, then?" she pressed.

Josh sat on the sofa as he tried to derail his mother's plans. "I just... I'm not sure, OK? This is a huge step and I want to be absolutely certain about it 'cuz it can't be undone! I can change my clothes in a few minutes, and I can get my name back in a month, but this? This is permanent! This'll affect the rest of my life! If I don't start puberty as a boy, I'll never be able to have kids!"

Taking a harsh tone, she nearly barked at him. "Adoption is better than having kids! The world is too overpopulated as it is without adding to it!"

Seeing she was now getting angry, Josh knew he'd already lost this round.

"Sweetie, we're not talking about starting you on female hormones yet!" she continued in a softer tone. "Just... not letting the male ones ruin your chances of happiness! If you start male puberty, your voice will change, you'll grow muscles and hair on your body, and forever have body image issues! We can't allow that! Until you start female hormones, you can still change your mind later! All we have to do is just stop using blockers and you'll begin male puberty, just a little late! Now, I've made an appointment for you for next Friday and that's that!"

Hating the image he saw in the mirror, his hair beautifully curled and his light makeup flawless, even his nails were painted a lovely pink shade that complimented his natural skin tone. Turning to see himself from the side and back, he saw the perfectly tied white satin bow in the back and felt a pit in his stomach, like he'd swallowed a cannonball.

Great. I look fabulous. he told himself sarcastically. Giving in, he consoled himself that Jennifer would be happy with him and found it helped a lot.

Grabbing a small white purse that matched the white of the dress trim and the strappy sandals that adorned his feet, he dropped his makeup, phone, keys, and what money he had in it. Steeling himself and plastering a fake smile on his face, he grabbed a small suitcase and headed out. Coming down the stairs, he almost felt good about himself before he heard his father.

"You look *beautiful*, princess!" he said genuinely. "An absolute *vision*!"

Blushing embarrassedly at the compliment, he dismissed it. "Oh, *Daddy*!"

"Don't 'Oh, Daddy' *me*!" he lovingly groused as Josh finished descending the stairs. "You look *great*! I hope you have a good time, princess!" Hugging him at the last step while careful not to muss his hair or makeup, Fred grabbed the digital camera off the railing. "Hold still!" he ordered.

Feeling that pit in his stomach again, he once more put on his phony smile and posed for the picture. Once done, he glanced at the pretty watch he wore. "Vicky should be here any minute." he said impatiently. Standing around for a time, he found himself restlessly unable to settle.

"Sit *down*, sweetheart." Melanie chided him gently as she sat on the couch reading her book. "Pacing won't get her here any faster!" Seeing him perch impatiently on the matching loveseat, she shook her head. "I still don't see why we couldn't drop you off, Jocelyn."

Just about to answer, he heard a car pull up outside. "She's *here*!" he said with relief as he got up and smoothed out his dress. Without even so much as a hug for his mother and father, he picked up the case and started toward the door. "See you tomorrow!" he shouted over his shoulder.

Heading out the door, he was glad that the Healys had said he could stay the night at their house and get ready for church in the morning with them. He was still livid with his mother and intentionally didn't hug Melanie or say he loved them. While his father backed Melanie up in pushing for hormone blockers, Josh knew that he only did so because it was her idea and he, being a good feminist, almost always agreed with her.

Jogging out to the Healy's sedan, he opened the front passenger door and slid in next to Vicky, belting in quickly and putting the small case under his legs. "Thanks for coming to get me!"

Vicky pulled out onto the street smiling. "It's *fine*, Jocelyn... um... sorry! *Joss*!" She laughed at herself for being unable to see the child as anything other than a girl, even though she knew him to be a boy in both mind and body. "You look *nice*!" she said, trying to make conversation. "Sorry, does that make you uncomfortable?"

"It's *fine*, Vicky." he sighed. "I *do* look nice. Heck, I look *beautiful* and I *know* it! I just wish..."

"Wish *what*, dear?" she asked as she turned a corner.

"I wish I could just be *me*." he admitted sadly. "I think it's too late, though." Looking over at her as she drove, he dropped the bomb. "Mom's taking me to Doctor Biggs next Friday to get my first shot of hormone blockers."

Pulling over quickly, Vicky turned to him in utter shock. "*Honey!* Are you *serious*? How can she *do* that? Don't you need a letter or something from a psychiatrist that proves you're... um..."

"*Dysphoric*." Josh finished for her. "Mom's a psychologist and had a co-worker of hers give her a letter. Turns out I saw him once for a few minutes before I went to summer camp. I didn't even know who he was at the time or that I was even 'seeing' him. I was *supposed* to just be waiting for Mom at her office and he 'just happened' to be there and asked me a few 'casual' questions." he explained with little air quotes. "That was *it*."

Looking out the window, Josh shook his head again. "So, I'm *stuck*. If anyone tries to stop her, she has the law on her side 'cuz parents can do *anything* with their kids so long as they aren't *abusing* them. With that paper, she has proof that putting me on hormones isn't abuse. I'm *stuck*."

Vicky once more started toward her home. "I'm *sorry*, dear. I wish I knew what to do. I'll have a talk with John tonight and see if he knows someone that can help, *OK*? Just..." She paused, worried for his safety. "Just don't lose *hope*." She was seriously concerned he might hurt himself rather than be turned into a girl against his will. "*Promise* you won't do anything drastic?"

Nodding, he still looked out the window. "I *promise*." He meant it, but he was also certain there wasn't anything that could be done.

When they started to get close to the Healy's home, his mood began to lift somewhat. Vicky noticed and smiled, glad that her daughter could have such a positive effect on such a troubled soul. Pulling into the driveway, and then

into the open garage, she pressed a remote control on the visor, closing the door behind them.

Climbing out, she watched Josh do the same and come around the front of the car, carrying the small suitcase. "Jenny's been *itching* to see you since she got home from school yesterday!" Pausing a moment, she tousled a few of his hairs back in place, stopping when she realized she was treating Josh just like a girl. "*Sorry, Joss... bad habit. Comes from raising a daughter!*"

"*That's OK, Vicky.*" he sighed as they walked in the house through the inside garage door and entered the hallway across from the master bedroom. "*I understand. It's only natural the way I look.*" he gestured to himself.

Coming into the living room, Josh saw that it was tastefully decorated for a teenager's birthday party. There weren't balloons, streamers, or things like that. Just a simple banner that read, "Happy Birthday Jennifer!" Underneath it he saw something that made his heart skip a beat as he put down his small suitcase. Jennifer was breathtaking in her lovely pale blue A-line dress that came down to mid-calf. The color went perfectly with her pale blonde hair that was curled and hanging loosely about her shoulders.

Jennifer just stood under the banner and looked back at him with wide-eyed awe at his innocent beauty. Slowly walking over to him, she took his hands as her mother removed herself to the kitchen. "You look *amazing*, Joss!" she said in a low, husky voice as she squeezed his hands gently.

"*Thanks!*" he blushed and looked away slightly. "You look *beautiful!* That dress is *perfect* for you!"

Releasing his hands, she smiled and turned in place quickly, letting the skirt flow around her like water. "Do you *like* it? *Mom* made it for me! She used to be a professional dress designer! I must be the luckiest girl in the *world!*" Moving in closely again, she put her arms over his shoulders, clasping her hands behind his head. Grinning, she looked down the hall and then at the

dining room. Seeing no one coming, she kissed his lips, soft and gently so as to not muss their lipstick. Then she took him into a warm hug.

Relishing the feel of her holding him, he nearly cried as he relaxed into her embrace. The built up tension and buried feelings of dread at being pushed onto blockers threatened to all come bursting out at once, save for the fact that he wouldn't let his problems ruin Jennifer's birthday. Swallowing hard and putting on a smile, he stepped back. "Where's your dad and Luke?"

"They took the minivan and went out to the park or something. Girls only here today!" Pausing a moment, her smile diminished. "Except for *you*, I mean. Do... would you like to change into something less girly?"

"It's OK." he sighed. "From you I don't seem to mind much, and I don't *have* anything else, anyway. Besides, it's *your* party and you *like* me this way. Is anyone else coming?"

Nodding, she answered as she led him into the dining room. "A few friends that I've known since Kindergarten, but we've only recently *really* become friends." she answered. "Karen, Lucy, and Erica."

Not knowing them, he looked down at himself. "I hope I *look* alright."

"You look *wonderful!*" she sighed happily as she stared at him with dreamy eyes. Hearing the doorbell, her expression changed to giddiness as she left Josh in the dining room and moved around her mother through the kitchen, taking the direct route to the entry hallway. Opening the door, she squealed as her three friends came in, all dressed nearly as nicely as Jennifer.

Josh could see them through the kitchen. Looking down at his dress, he gulped. *I look like a little girl compared to them.* he chastised himself. His dress was beautiful, but the fact that it only came down to just past his knees made it look juvenile in contrast to the styles the four girls were wearing. Steeling himself, he waited next to the dining room table for introductions.

"You look *so* pretty in that!" Jennifer complimented Karen on her outfit.

"*Thanks!*" the girl said shyly, not used to such praise. Handing a wrapped package to Jennifer she grinned. "*Here!* Happy birthday!"

"*Thank you!*" Jennifer said sincerely.

Repeating the process with Lucy and Erica, the four made their way to the dining room by way of the living room. The four girls had bonded in the last year of Intermediate school based on their common experience; they were all social outcasts. While Karen was awkward and unattractive, Erica was heavy and Lucy was the only Asian girl at their school. When rumor got out that Jennifer had a crush on her best friend, she'd joined the other outcasts.

"Lucy? Erica? Karen? I want you all to meet *Jocelyn!*" she said as the four saw Josh standing shyly by the table. "*Joss?* These are my friends!"

Feeling scrutinized from the instant their eyes hit him, he swallowed hard and tried to smile. "H... Hi! Nice to meet you all!"

Lucy looked at Josh like a bug under a microscope. "Um... so... nice *dress.*" she said, not knowing what else to say.

"*Yeah.*" Erica said absently. "You look nice... for a *b...*" She was interrupted as Karen elbowed her in the ribs before the other girl could say what all three were thinking. "*What!*" Erica grumbled at her quietly.

Seeing her three friends who she felt could understand Josh's situation as a social outcast do the same thing to him as everyone else at school, her smile melted. "*Guys? What's wrong? Why are you being like...*" Flustered, she was nearly in tears. "...like everyone treats *you?*"

Karen and Lucy looked down ashamedly, but Erica couldn't see it. "What do you *expect*, Jenn? He's not a *girl...* and he's wearing a *dress!*"

Vicky listened from the kitchen, but didn't want to interfere unless she had to. She felt the best thing she could do was wait and see if they'd resolve their differences on their own. Hearing Erica's comment, she decided she needed to defuse the situation before it became serious. Walking out and carrying a tray of *h'orderves*, she smiled. "*Here we go!*" she offered. "Erica! Karen! Lucy! Nice to see you!" Putting the tray on the table she regarded them all. "*Well! Don't you all look lovely! Shall we sit and chat?*"

Seeing Jennifer's mother not react to Josh at all, the three stared at him as he sat next to Vicky.

"*Thank you, Vicky.*" he said softly. "I'd be happy to."

Karen rolled her eyes frustratedly at Erica and moved to sit on Vicky's other side, followed by Lucy next to Karen. That left just Erica and Jennifer, the two staring at one another like gunfighters; each waiting for the other to say something and ready with a quick comeback.

"*Erica?*" Vicky said gently. "Will you be joining us?"

Crooking her jaw to one side and narrowing her eyes as she looked at Josh, a habit she had when trying to decide something, she at last tentatively moved to sit next to Lucy. "*Sure, Mrs. Healy.*" Never taking her eyes off Josh as though he might suddenly spring to his feet and attack her, she sat slowly and watched out of the corner of her eye as Jennifer went around the table to sit next to Josh.

"Um... Mrs. *Healy?*" Erica began. "You *do* know he's really a *boy*, right?"

"Yes, Erica." she said calmly as she put a few cucumber slices and some stuffed olives on a small plate in front of her. "Though considering how she *looks*, it would be inappropriate to call her *he* unless she *asks* you to, don't you think?"

Josh sadly stood up, the three girls watching him intently. "I should just go. I'm *sorry*, Jenn. I didn't *mean* to ruin your party."

"*No!*" Jennifer yelled as she leapt from her chair. "*Stay! Please*, Joss? If you leave, the party *will* be ruined!"

"I don't think your friends *like* me very much." he said openly as he stood behind his chair and looked at them. "It's OK. *I* understand. I'm a *freak*. The boy that looks, talks, and acts like a girl. I'll just take the bus home, Vicky. You don't have to leave your guests. This was just a *mistake*."

"Please sit down, Joss." Vicky said evenly. "You are Jenny's *guest* and are welcome in this house. Anyone who thinks *otherwise* is *not*." she stated as she leveled her gaze at Erica. "Though I'd rather hope that everyone can get along and not be *judgmental* of one another."

When Josh sat back down, Erica stood up. "I think I should go, then." she said harshly. "How can you all *stand* it! *Look* at him! He looks *ridiculous!*"

Jennifer flashed into anger in an instant. "She does *not!* She looks *beautiful* and you *know* it! If you didn't know her and ran into her on the street, you'd *never* know she was anything other than a totally gorgeous *girl!* You're just *jealous!*"

"*Girls!*" Vicky exclaimed, trying to defuse the situation, but was interrupted by Erica's return outburst.

"You *like* him!" Erica said in shock. "You're *sick!* You've got a crush on *that?*" she said pointing a finger at Josh.

"*Yes!*" she admitted openly, shocking Lucy and Karen. "I think that she's *wonderful*, and you would *too* if you actually got to *know* her!" Looking at Josh, she smiled sweetly at him and her voice softened. "She's thoughtful, kind, considerate, smart..." Whipping back around toward Erica, her voice

turned harsh again. "...and a *way* better friend than *you*, Erica! She may be a *boy*, but she can change her clothes to *look* like one and *still* be just as sweet! *You* could change into the most beautiful gown in the *world*, but you'd still just be a nasty *bitch*!"

"*Jenny*!" her mother chastised. "*Language*!"

Fuming at the insult, inside Erica felt the sting of truth and railed against it. "*Fine*!" she shouted. Picking up her gift, she looked at Lucy and Karen. "*Well*? You staying with *that* or are you gonna come to your senses and show *it* that *it's* not welcome *anywhere*?"

Turning away from Erica as she saw the irate girl for who she really was, Lucy finally spoke up. "Maybe you should just go if you can't be *nice*, Erica." Looking over at Josh, she sighed. "I'm *staying*."

Karen, not sure what to do, surveyed Erica and then Lucy, Jennifer, and finally Josh. Taking a breath, she let it out slowly. "Mrs. *Healy*? Could you pass the olives? They look *good*!"

Not believing that her three best friends had all turned against her, Erica screamed at them. "*Fine* then! See if I care! You're all stupid anyway! I don't know why I *ever* was friends with you! *Goodbye*!" At that, she stormed out of the house, slamming the door as she left.

Facing the four others, Josh hung his head sadly. "I'm *sorry*, everyone. I shouldn't have come."

"*Nonsense*!" Vicky said as she took Josh's hand. "You are *always* welcome in this house, no matter *what* you wear or call yourself. It's just clothes and names are just labels. You're a good *person*, Joss."

"Don't mind Erica, Jocelyn." Lucy said as she glanced at him. "She's kinda got a nasty temper. Usually she's nice, but sometimes she's just *mean*. We

try to look past it, but today was too much. What she said was just *cruel*. You *don't* look ridiculous! You look really *nice! Honest!*"

Karen just nodded in agreement as she munched a stuffed olive.

Feeling Jennifer's hands on his shoulders, he turned his head to peer up at her. "I'm *sorry*, Jenn. I didn't want you to lose your friend."

"After the way she *treated* you, she no friend of *mine!*" Jennifer growled as she dropped like a rock into the seat next to Josh.

After a moment's silence, Lucy shattered it. "So... you and Jocelyn? *That's* cool! She a good *kisser?*"

Karen nearly choked on her olive at Lucy's brash remark while Jennifer, Josh, and Vicky blushed and looked away. "*Luce!*" Karen said between coughs. "You are *so* crude!" After a moment, Karen and Lucy began to giggle, spreading then to Jennifer and Vicky. Lastly, Josh began to giggle along with the others as the tension in the room evaporated.

As the four 'girls' and Vicky began chatting easily between each other, the mood lightened enough for Jennifer to open her presents. Lucy had given her a cute skirt that Vicky said was too short and Karen had bought her a pretty blouse. When everyone turned to Josh, he cleared his throat and pulled a tiny box out of his purse.

"Here, Jenn. Happy birthday!" he said softly.

Opening his gift excitedly, she removed the wrapping to reveal a velvet box. Lifting the lid, her eyes went wide for a moment before they scrunched up in tears. "Oh, *Jocelyn!* It's *beautiful!*"

"Lemme *see!*" Lucy and Karen chorused as Vicky took the gift and Jennifer hugged Josh tightly.

Pulling the necklace out of the box, Vicky held it up and drew in a breath. It was a simple gold chain and heart-shaped pendant. On the front in cursive script was the word 'Together' above and the word 'Forever' below a single opal stone set next to an amethyst; the birthstones for October and February, Jennifer and Josh's birth months.

"*Jocelyn!*" Vicky said at last. "Where did you *find* this?"

Once Jennifer let him go to take the necklace back from Vicky to admire it, he shrugged. "At the jewelers on Maple." he said with a slight smile. "The necklace is just one they had, but I had the stones put in. Is it *OK?*"

"It's a *lovely* gift, dear!" Vicky said as she smiled. "Maybe a little *much!*"

Taking off the pendant she wore that was a gift from her aunt three years ago, Jennifer slipped the necklace on and had Josh get up. "How does it *look?*" she asked grinning.

Blushing, he cast his eyes to the floor shyly. "It looks *perfect!*"

After the two other girls admired it, talk changed to other subjects. While they chatted and sat together, being quite grown up, Jennifer slipped Josh's hand into hers under the table and wouldn't let go.

After her father came home with an exhausted Luke in tow, Vicky gathered the girls and Josh together and left for the movie theater. Getting five tickets for *MirrorMask*, they took their seats in the darkened theater with Jennifer sitting next to Josh and holding his hand the entire time. At one point Josh felt Jennifer lift his hand to her lips and kiss the back of it gently.

After the movie, Vicky dropped Lucy and Karen off before returning to their home with Josh. He'd earned the trust of both John and Vicky to the point that they believed even if Jennifer wanted to 'go too far' Josh wouldn't, simply because he'd given his word. So that night he would be sleeping in

Jennifer's room; the 'door open' rule suspended for the occasion as a special concession to Jennifer for her birthday. Still, Vicky was worrying herself sick as they walked in the door.

"Luke will be in bed already, so why don't you change in the bathroom, Joss?" she said nervously.

"*Vicky?*" he said softly. "If this makes you uncomfortable, I should go home. It's OK. I understand. You *trust* me, but not *that* much."

"*No!*" Vicky denied her fears. Glancing at Jennifer and telling her wordlessly to go to her room and change, she waited until they were alone. "Joss, I *believe* you when you say you'll be on your best behavior. I *do!*" Trying to formulate the right words, she sighed. "It's just an irrational fear, dear. It's not your fault and I don't want you to have to go home!" Closing her eyes and sighing once again, she opened them and looked him in the eyes. "Just promise me *again* that you won't do anything you *shouldn't* tonight."

"*I promise.*" he said seriously. "I wouldn't want to ruin anything! If we did something... um... *adult*... it might ruin *everything*. It wouldn't be *worth* it."

Hugging him earnestly, she let her fears go and trusted the broken child in her arms to keep his word. "I *believe* you, sweetie! I know you... that you... you *care* for her... and wouldn't risk that for *anything*. *Thank you!*" Letting him go, she still had a hard time seeing the child as a boy, even knowing the truth. "Go get changed!" she said with a smile. "I'll get your bed ready!"

He'd decided to take a shower in the morning, so he hung his off-white A-line dress with the pink flowers out on the hook used for robes, intent on using his shower to steam any wrinkles out that didn't fall out overnight. After that he quickly changed and washed up. When he'd scrubbed off all his makeup, he pulled out his brush and came out brushing his hair that was getting long enough to soon need another trip to the salon, though he still held out hope that he'd never have to go there again.

Walking into his girlfriend's bedroom, he saw that Vicky had laid out a thin roll-up foam mattress and several quilts as a bed with a spare comforter on top. Jennifer was sitting up in her bed, watching him brush his hair out.

"*What?*" he asked, stopping his hair care regimen.

"*Nothing!*" she said with a grin as she fingered the necklace he'd given her that she refused to remove.

Shaking his head, he sat at the desk and continued brushing until it was soft and wavy once more. He was about done when Vicky knocked on the door.

Opening it, she tip-toed in and whispered, "You two all set for the night? *Need* anything?"

"*Yeah.*" Jennifer said with an impish smile. "For my mother to stop *spying* on us to make sure we aren't making out! *Goodnight, Mom!*" she giggled.

Sighing and holding up her hands in mock surrender, she sighed. "*Alright! Hop up and give me a kiss goodnight and I'll go!*"

Jennifer got up and walked over to her mother. Hugging her tightly, she sighed. "*Thanks, Mom! Today was wonderful! I love you!*"

Returning the hug, she let her daughter go only to see Josh there waiting for his turn in a white cotton nightie trimmed in lace. Taking him in her arms, she held him no less warmly than she had her own daughter. "Goodnight, Joss."

"Goodnight, Vicky." he said warmly. "*Thanks.*"

Releasing him, Vicky looked at him as she held him at arm's length. "For *what, dear?*"

"For making me promise not to give up." he said before he leaned in and kissed her cheek.

Nearly crying, she hugged him fiercely this time. "We'll think of *something!*" she promised. Letting him go, she wiped her eyes dry and padded to the door. "*Goodnight*, you two. Sleep well and God *bless!*"

As she closed the door, Josh went to lay down on his makeshift bed, but was stopped when Jennifer asked, "What was *that* all about?"

Explaining in brief his fate the following Friday and Vicky's intention to help him escape it, the girl hugged him as well. "I won't let your mom *do* it, Joss!" she promised in vain.

"*We'll* see." he said hopelessly. "We should get to bed. I'll need a shower in the morning before I get dressed."

"*Wait!*" she said as she knelt by her bedside and silently bowed her head. After a moment, she said, "Amen." and got back up.

"What was *that?*" he asked curiously.

"I was saying a *prayer* for you. Asking for God's help... if He *can.*"

Sitting on her bed, he was still confused. "I thought you were supposed to do that *privately*... and aren't there certain words you have to say? It's so *confusing!*"

Jennifer lighted beside him and took his hand. "We *are* in private, and God knows what you want without even *asking*. He's *everywhere*, even in our *heads!*"

Puzzling over another point, he asked, "OK, you said 'if He *can.*' Isn't He supposed to be *omnipotent*? Can't He do *anything?*"

Jennifer tried to explain. "It's like this. He *can* do anything, but sometimes He *won't* because He needs something to happen we *don't* like to make something even *better* happen later... or because it's out of His hands. See, He won't *make* people do things, 'cuz He gave us free will. That means we can do things He doesn't want us to do, even if it's bad and He wants us to do something else."

Contemplating the idea, he followed the conclusion to the end. "So then... He *can't* help me. He won't change my mom's mind, so it's up to your mom and dad. If *they* can't help..."

Pulling him into her arms, she hugged him and then kissed him gently. "We'll think of *something*, Joss." she echoed her mother's hope. Kissing him tenderly once more, they continued kissing as they sat on her bed for some time before retiring to their own beds.

At some point in the night, Josh partially awoke to feel a comforting warmth move in under his borrowed covers and against his back; an arm wrapping around him lovingly. Smiling softly, he was only partially aware of just who or what it was, but he knew one thing for certain.

He was *loved*.

Chapter 15 - Hard Lessons in Parenting 101

Slowly, Josh became aware of a hand shaking his shoulder. Not wanting to leave the warm comfort he felt, he groaned at the hand. "Go 'way!"

"*Jocelyn...*" a voice pierced his dream-state. "*Joss?* It's time to get *up*." the lovely voice whispered in his ear so closely that her breath tickled, causing him to squirm slightly in delight.

Both piqued and provoked, he felt the hand move from his shoulder to his hip. Giving him a gentle shake, Josh heard the voice even closer.

"*Joss?* Your phone alarm woke me up. I need to go back to my bed and you need to get up and take your shower." the voice whispered again.

Trying to roll over to look, he found he couldn't roll on his back as there was something... someone... pressed up against it, the feel of soft breasts were pressing into his shoulder blades. Turning his head slowly, the vision of Jennifer's lovely face, so close that he could feel her warm breath on his skin, swam into view in the darkness of the room that was lit only by the soft glow of the streetlight twenty feet from her window. "*Jenn?*"

"Good *morning*, beautiful!" she whispered happily before kissing his cheek. "You need to get up. I'm going back to my bed."

Scooting his body around so he could face her better, he gazed into her joyful eyes. "*Jenn... what're you doing... down here?*"

"You were having a nightmare last night and it woke me up." she explained. "I laid next to you and held you until you settled down." Shyly smiling, she added, "You felt *so* nice, I... I fell asleep next to you."

He felt her hand on his nearly naked hip, his nightgown having ridden up in his sleep. "Um... *Jenn*, this is very... *intimate*." he said plainly.

Giggling quietly, she removed her hand. "*Sorry!* We didn't *do* anything, if that's what you're worried about. Just *sleep* together. It was *so* nice, though! I wish I could stay like this *forever!* But..." Extracting herself reluctantly, she moved back into her cold bed and under her covers while Josh got up. "Have a nice shower!" she said dreamily as she lay her head against her pillow and closed her eyes. Seeing her lying there looking so happy and peaceful, he couldn't help but sigh with contentment.

Putting on his robe and slippers, he padded his way to the bathroom, locked the door, and showered. He made the water much warmer than usual and left the fan off, so by the time he'd finished the room was filled with steam. After drying off, he ran his hands over the dress he'd hung out, smoothing away the few wrinkles that remained. Turning on the fan, he dressed hastily and came out just in time to see a bleary-eyed Luke standing at the door.

"Need 'ta *potty!*" he demanded sleepily as Josh got out of his way and moved back into Jennifer's bedroom.

Seeing the time after closing the door to her room behind him, Josh grinned and sat on Jennifer's bed next to her and gently shook her shoulder, his hair still damp from the shower. "Wake up, beautiful! *Your* turn to get up!"

Opening her eyes and seeing him there, she smiled and stretched. "Good morning!" Just as she did so, there was a soft knock on the door. "Come in?" she grumbled as Josh stood and moved to her desk to get ready.

Vicky entered, glad to see Jennifer still under covers and Josh fully dressed in his off-white floral. "Good *morning*, you two! Sleep well?"

"Best sleep *ever!*" Jennifer said softly as she gazed longingly over at Josh sitting at her desk and brushing out his hair. Turning back to her mother, she saw the worry in her eyes as the woman glanced from Josh to her and back. "It was just nice having her *close*, Mom. *Honest!* Nothing *happened!*"

Looking at Josh just focusing on his hair with the faintest hint of guilt in his eyes made Vicky a little nervous. She knew Josh would tell her if they'd done anything if she asked, but she wanted the truth from her daughter. "*Joss?* Would you move to the bathroom so Jenny can get up? Luke is out now."

The boy glanced up at her and collected his things, passing her and heading to the door. "*Sure, Vicky. I'll try not to be long.*"

After he left the room, the woman turned to her daughter sternly. "*Alright, young lady. You look like a bride on her first wedded morning. Talk!*"

Jennifer shrugged. "*It's nothing, Mom! Honest!* Joss had a nightmare last night and I laid down next to her for a bit to calm her down and that's *it!* I swear! I just laid *next* to her and *held* her... like you used to do with me when I was little. Her back was to me the *whole* time and I didn't touch *anything!* She never even woke up!"

Taking a deep breath, she stared closely at her daughter, seeing no lie in her eyes. "Then why do you look so... *content.*"

Lying back on her pillow, she closed her eyes and made herself say what she was feeling. "It just felt *so* nice Mom, laying next to her like that! I... I think I might *love* her... for *real!* Not just a crush... not like with Janice. If she asked me, I think I'd *marry* her! I think I'd do about *anything* for her, just to make her happy!" Sitting up, she saw the chance to change the subject. "Mom, we *have* to help her! You know what her parents are going to *do?* *Hormones!* We need to call the *cops* or something!"

"I *know*, sweetie." Vicky said as she sat on the bed next to her daughter. "I think we should *start* by calling *him* Josh, dear. I know he seems to like it *whatever* you call him, but he needs *you*, more than anyone, to love him the way he *is*... not the way you *want* him to be." She sighed and petted Jennifer's hair. "He... he *loves* you, sweetheart. That means you can hurt him more easily and more profoundly than *anyone*... even his parents."

"What can we *do* about them, Mom?" she asked almost in tears. "There has to be *something* we can do!"

"I talked with your father last night about it." she explained. "He looked into things and found that if everything Josh says is true, which we *believe* him," she forestalled the obvious objection Jennifer was about to voice to the mere suggestion he could be lying, "then the only real option we have is to plead his case to his parents. *They* have the final say until he's eighteen. *Period*. If they can prove he's... um..."

"Dysphoric." Jennifer helped.

"*Thank* you. ...dysphoric, by use of a letter from a psychiatrist, then no *legal* method can stop them. We can only appeal to their good sense and try to help them *hear* what Josh is trying to tell them." As Jennifer sat up and hugged her mother, the woman tried to sooth her worries away. "We'll do all that we *can*, sweetie. I *promise*."

Josh finished styling his hair and checked his makeup again. Sighing that he still seemed every bit the perfect pre-teen girl, his hope died a little more. *By this time next week, I'll be stuck like this for at least three months*. Near to tears, he forced himself to shove the feelings away so that he didn't ruin his makeup. Giggling a little at the irony, that he was trying to 'man up' so he didn't make his mascara run, it helped elevate his mood somewhat.

He was honestly looking forward to going to services. Having been twice, he was starting to get the hang of things and understand the appeal, even to someone like him who was agnostic. *If there is a God*, he determined, *he's pretty 'hands-off' when it comes to doing anything*.

He did consider that perhaps if there was a God, his work was made manifest in the seemingly random things in life. Things like a child with a debilitating illness suddenly going into remission for no reason, or the apparently random encounters in life, such as his meeting Jennifer the way he did.

I didn't plan on going out to the grass to sit and eat. I wasn't really paying attention to where I was going. I just sort of seemed to end up there. Was that God or happenstance? he wondered while he finished his final touches.

What he liked was the feeling he had with so many cheerful people at the church services. Disregarding the theological question, he intended to keep going with the Healy family for that reason alone. For a short time, he could forget his problems and just be happy to be around happy people. Adjusting the little pink flowers that were his earrings, he smiled at the total effect, even though he wished it wasn't him that looked that way. Gathering his things, he headed to the living room to wait for the others.

Seeing John already there and waiting, he sat at the dining room table with the man and smiled. "*Thank you.*" he said simply.

Turning to the youth, Jennifer's father grimaced weakly. "For *what*, Joss?"

"For letting me spend time with your family." he began. "For wanting to help me. For being so kind and understanding. You're *nothing* like my parents say Christians are, and neither are the people at church. *Especially* Pastor Roberts! He's smart, funny, and... just *nice*! So... *thank you.*"

Genuinely humbled, John patted Josh's hand on the table. "Then you're very *welcome.*" he answered joyfully before his mouth turned to a frown. "I don't know that we can help you with your parents, Joss. They seem very..." He struggled to find a polite way of putting it. "...*determined*... to see that you be a girl. We're going to have to talk to them today in order to try and stop their plans for you next Friday." Seeing Josh nod sadly at the fact, he turned away and continued almost to himself. "I don't know what I'd do if Luke wanted to be a girl. Hope it was a phase and he'd grow out of it, I suppose."

"But if it *wasn't*..." he paused to think, "I'd like to think I'd be willing to at least *listen* to him. I'd probably do as your parents are doing though... make a decision for him based on what I think's in his best interests and just hope

I made the right call. That's *parenting*! You do your best, try to make the most rational decisions you can, and listen to your heart for the rest."

Laughing a moment, the older man shook his head. "I remember my mother used to tell me, '*Kids don't come with instruction manuals.*' and since every one is different, every child you raise you do it as a novice. Oh, *some* things you get better at, like how to change a diaper, how to tell when they need an aspirin or the doctor, or make sure they're doing their homework... but the *rest*? Educated guesswork."

Turning back toward Josh, he grinned again. "*There!* Now you know the secret! Parents are rank amateurs working the most complex and important fieldwork *imaginable*... creating a functional human being... but it's the best job in the *world*! The worst thing *anyone* can do is to try and fiddle around with someone else's project. I only know we have to try and make them see that they're operating without feedback from the equipment... and that can lead to *catastrophic* results... including total loss of the project."

Seeing the analogy to the man's job working as a foreman for the power company, Josh nodded. "So, in your example, I'm the 'equipment' and my parents aren't taking my 'feedback', *right*?" Seeing him nod, Josh continued. "So, parents should listen to what their kids want?"

"Within *reason*." he pointed out. "Not to drive the analogy *too* far, feedback is no substitute for good judgement parents spend a lifetime earning. Often you have to ignore 'feedback' because the 'equipment' just wants ice-cream!"

Making Josh giggle, he saw Vicky and Jennifer come into the living room. The older of the two wore a long red and eggshell floral dress that hugged her waist and flared out at the hips. Jennifer was a vision to his eyes, wearing a pretty eggshell silk blouse and a mid-calf-length skirt that exactly matched the pattern in her mother's dress; obviously made of the same material.

"Where's *Luke*?" Vicky asked as she looked around, putting on her gloves.

"In his room, playing cars to occupy him in the cleanest way possible." John said as he stood and helped Josh up by the hand without even thinking. "I'll go get him, you get the girls..." he paused, winced, and turned to Josh with a pained expression. "*Sorry. ...get the kids into the van.*"

Nodding silently, she led the two outside and into the back seat once more, joined shortly by John and a recalcitrant Luke. As they drove to the church, the nine-year-old boy was quite vocal about his distress.

"I wasn't *done!*" he pouted and yelled. "I just needed a little longer and I coulda got that jump 'ta work!"

"That's quite *enough*, Luke." Vicky admonished him. "Keep it up and you won't *get* to finish after brunch. We'll take your cars *away.*"

Duly censured, the boy rode the rest of the trip in silence. Josh watched the exchange, in it seeing a practical example of what John was talking about. It was compassion, good judgement, and using the boy's feedback to adjust the situation to make Luke follow their desired course of action; namely behave in the car, at church, and during brunch.

The only question that remained was how to make his parents listen to his 'feedback' when they were convinced that their opinions were better than his. Even as he pondered the problem, Jennifer held his hand and watched him with a worried expression on her face. Leaning closer, he whispered, "Your mom and dad said that when they take me home, it's time to talk to them... try and convince them I don't want to be a girl. I... I hope it works."

Jenny gulped and nodded quickly. "Me... me *too...* *Josh.* I... I really hope that today is the last day you *have* to be Jocelyn."

Arriving as they had the previous two weeks, the five made their way to the doors, Pastor Roberts there to greet them as usual.

"*John! Vicky!* And welcome again, Jocelyn! You too, Jennifer. I understand you turned *thirteen* yesterday! Congratulations! Did you have a good day?"

With a nod and a grin, she couldn't help but touch the pendant that she wore alongside her plain gold cross. "*Yes!* I had *all* my friends there, we had a nice lunch, then went out to a movie! It was *great!*" She couldn't stop herself from stealing several glances at Josh as she spoke.

Smiling, he glanced over at their guest as well. "I'm guessing that you were among the guests at her party, Jocelyn?" Seeing him nod, he straightened up and smiled at them both. "I'm very glad for you *both*, then!"

"What 'bout *me?*" Luke interjected. "Dad took me to the park and we played *baseball!*"

"More like *catch.*" John clarified. "Still, we had a good time!"

Josh had never envied a nine-year-old boy so much in his life at hearing that. Not that he especially liked baseball, he didn't, but just doing something a normal boy might do with his father was appealing. At the same time, he wouldn't have traded spending that day with Jennifer for all the games of catch with a loving father in the history of the world.

Going in and taking their seats, Josh enjoyed the service. He wondered if people would still be as friendly to him as a boy though, noting that a few boys his age were not as well monitored and talked to in-often, if at all. As a result, or possibly as a cause, he couldn't tell which, they were much more rambunctious and loud before and after the services and inattentive during.

Afterward, the family went once more to the same restaurant and enjoyed a lively conversation on the sermon that day, *Are we saved by Good Works or are Good Works evidence that we've been saved?* Once Josh had figured out what 'good works' were, he found the topic fascinating.

"So, if I understand it *right*," he puzzled, "no one can *earn* a place in heaven, because you'd have to be perfect to *deserve* a place there. It can only be given to you *un-earned... undeserved*. Then you try the rest of your life to *deserve* it, knowing you can't live up to the task? Wouldn't that just be *frustrating*?"

"Not *really*." John answered with a smile. He liked that Josh was interested and yet took nothing for granted in it; wanted to understand faith and make sense of it, and thereby the people that practiced it. "Trying yields its *own* rewards. Let me put it *this* way. You have a *goal*. Even if it's an *impossible* goal, just working *towards* it makes you a better person for the effort. Plus, once a person's been saved, they *want* to try."

"Hmm. I'll have to *think* about that." he pondered. Changing the topic, he brought up the disparity in how the young boys were treated in church versus how the girls were treated. "I have a special *interest* in this subject," he hinted, "so I guess I'm just more aware of the difference. Why is it they're treated *differently*?"

Vicky fielded this one as she leaned in close to him with a hushed voice. "Because boys and girls *are* different. *You* should know that better than anyone *here*. You know what it's like to be stuck on the wrong side of that difference. If there *were* no difference, it wouldn't matter to you *which* you were, *would* it? So then, why all the angst about being one over the other?"

Just at that moment, Josh realized he was operating from an assumption that had been drilled into his head for as long as he could remember; the idea that there *were* no differences between men and women or boys and girls, other than their primary and secondary sexual characteristics. He was living proof that his parents' assertions of it as immutable fact were wrong.

Making their way back to the car, Josh held Jennifer's hand tightly. "I... I know I gotta go home. I don't *want* to though. I feel like that girl in the movie when the queen makes her think she's the princess, but then Valentine breaks the spell. You all broke *my* spell, but I have to go back to the evil queen."

"But you won't be going back *alone!*" Jennifer smiled. "Step into my flying tower!" she said as she gestured toward the minivan, making the two giggle.

After stopping by the house to pick up Josh's things, they arranged for Karen to baby-sit Luke, which went as smoothly as a cat giving birth to an alligator.

"I don't need no dumb *babysitter!*" he insisted. "Why can't I go *with* you?"

Taking his turn to help, Josh led the boy into his room and knelt down in front of him. "*Luke?* I need you to do me a favor. I need your mom and dad to help me with something. I can't tell you what, it's a secret, but I *really* need their help, *OK?* You know how good and smart they are, *right?*" Seeing the boy nod shyly, Josh continued. "So, will you help me? If you come *with* us, they can't help me and something bad might happen to me. I need them to help protect me, but you can't know *why*, so you have to just trust me and stay here while they help. Can you *do* that for me?"

Examining Josh carefully, he sighed. "OK. I *like* you. You make Jenny *happy* so she's not *bugging* me all the time. I'll stay."

"*Good!*" Josh said with a grin. "Can Karen stay with you so she's not alone? She doesn't know the secret, so she needs to stay here, too. In fact, you need to keep it a secret that there's even a secret to *keep!* OK?"

"Sure." he nodded and smiled weakly. "I'll keep her safe here."

"*Thanks, Luke!*" he said and started to lean in for a hug before reconsidering and just extended his hand. "Help me up?"

That taken care of, the four of them all headed back to Josh's home, hopefully to end the nightmare that he'd found himself trapped in for the last month.

When they reached his house, Josh gulped in fear. "Are you sure we have to do this *now?* Maybe I haven't tried hard enough to *like* being a girl!"

Jennifer shook her head. "No, Joss. You can't learn to like being something you're *not*. You need *help* and we want to help you. You said so yourself, your parents aren't *bad* people. Once they see us agree with you that you shouldn't be *forced* to be a girl if you don't *want* to, they'll listen." Looking up at her parents nervously, she steeled herself. "I... I *love* you. I can't just stand by and watch them take a... a wonderful *boy* like you and turn you into what *they* want. You need to be *you*... so I can love *you*... Josh."

Sitting next to her, he was in awe of what she'd just professed. *She... she loves me? As Josh? Do... do I love her? How do I know?* Thinking a moment, he remembered something he'd read once. *Love is when the happiness of another person is essential to your own.* Imagining Jennifer being sad made him need to do anything to make her happy because he couldn't be happy if she wasn't. Turning it around, he realized that she must truly love him in return. *She needs me to be me so I can be happy... so she can be happy.*

"I think I love you *too*, Jenn. I know I'd do *anything* to make you happy, even stay living as a girl, but if I don't *have* to, I'd rather just be *myself*."

"Then why don't we go in and *talk*." Vicky suggested. "That's why we *came*!"

The four climbed out of the car and made their way up the flagstones, Josh leading the way. When they got to the door, he opened it and saw his parents sitting on the loveseat. "*Hi! We're here!*" Holding the door for the three others, he closed it behind them.

Getting up, Melanie went up to Josh. "Welcome *home*, sweetie!" she said as she hugged him. "OK, Jocelyn. So what's this about? All you said on the phone was that the Healys wanted to talk about something important." Seeing Jennifer standing next to him and holding his hand with an aspect of fear in her eyes, she turned to the girl's parents. "Is she pregnant?"

"*No*." John said with a mild chuckle. "Nothing like that. We wanted to talk to you about... well... about *Josh*. May we sit?"

Furrowing her brow, she crossed her arms. "Please, don't *call* her that! It's painful for her to hear! Don't you *know* that?"

Stepping forward, Vicky tried to calm things down. "*Please*, Melanie. We just want to talk about the situation... to help in any way we can. *Please?*"

Relaxing somewhat, she sat next to Fred and gestured toward the couch. "Take a seat." Seeing the four of them sit together, including Josh, she felt a pang of jealousy that he'd chosen them over her.

"OK." Fred began. "Let's not cloud the issue with unneeded pleasantries or formalities. Obviously, *something's* wrong or you wouldn't *be* here."

Josh turned to Vicky for support, but she just nodded back at him. When he got the same from John and then Jennifer, though the girl at least squeezed his hand reassuringly, he turned to his parents. Taking a breath, he held it a moment before pushing the words out. *I hope they're right about you two.* he thought before he said it. "Daddy? Mom? I'm a *boy*."

"*What?*" Melanie shouted and stood up.

"*Mel?*" Fred said calmly. "Let's hear her *out*, at least."

Josh's mother stared daggers at the trio sitting with her child. "*Fine!* But I already know what's going on!" Sitting down heavily, she glared at her son.

Suddenly losing his nerve, Josh's face sank. *What's the use.* he sulked. *She's already made up her mind. It's hopeless.*

Seeing him begin to falter, Jennifer forged ahead. "Mrs. *Ryan?* I *love* Joss. I think I've loved her from the first moment I *saw* her." When she saw his mother's face soften at the sentiment, she took the plunge. "But even I'd rather love Josh for *himself* than Jocelyn as the *fake* person that he *pretends* to be because he feels *trapped*. You never asked him what *he* feels."

"I think I know my own *daughter!*" Melanie snapped back. "I'm an expert in psychology! Besides, I had her checked by a licensed psychiatrist. I think that *his* opinion is better than a thirteen-year-old *girl's!*"

"But he doesn't *know* Josh, Mrs. Ryan!" she pleaded. "I *do!* You can't get to know someone in just a few minutes! *Please!* Don't *do* this to him! It... it'll *kill* him inside if you force him to become a girl against his will!"

"Now, nobody's forcing *anything!*" Fred countered. "Jocelyn's *admitted* to us, *repeatedly*, by word and action, that she's a girl. Jocelyn is my *daughter*. She went through a lot of hardship getting where she is, and I won't let *anyone* influence her to throw that all away just because you want her to be a boy!"

"But Mr. Ryan, I *don't* want her to be a boy!" Jennifer cried. "I... I'm *gay*, OK? I like *girls!* I *love* Jocelyn! She's *wonderful!* I don't *want* Joss to change back into Josh, but I *need* him to or else he can't ever be happy!" Pausing for a moment, she added softly, "I'd rather die alone than see Josh forced to be something he isn't."

Her heartfelt sentiment defused their anger, but not their resolve. "None of this matters." Fred stated flatly. "Jocelyn is a *girl*. That's been proven by her own words and actions. So, why are you all trying to convince her that she's a boy? What's *really* going on here?"

Taking Jennifer's strength to fight back, Josh took a breath. "Daddy? I was *pretending* to be Jocelyn. You didn't give me any *choice*. You never *asked* me what I want, you just *told* me. I *don't* want to be a girl. I'm a *boy*."

Melanie shook her head. "*Jocelyn*, come over here with us. They're *confusing* you! That's just your *body!*" she argued. "Your *mind* is a *girl's* mind!"

Frustrated, he sat back down next to Jennifer. "I *told* you they would never listen." he almost cried. "It's *useless*. They *hate* me!"

"Of *course* we don't hate you, Jocelyn!" Melanie stated. "But we *do* know what's *best* for you and these people are not helping your self identity! They have their *own* agenda, and I know what it is." She stared at the gold cross Jennifer still wore alongside the gift from Josh. "They're Christian extremists, Fred! *Look!*"

Seeing the cross she indicated, Fred sighed. "I would ask you three to leave and never bother my daughter again. If you do, I'll get a restraining order."

As his father said the words, the life in Josh's eyes died.

"*No!*" screamed Jennifer as she wrapped her arms around Josh and they held each other as tightly as they could. "*Please!* Don't *say* that Mr. Ryan! I'll do *anything!* Just don't *say* that! I *love* her and she *loves me!* *Please!*"

Sympathizing with her plight, Fred still shook his head. "I'm sorry, Jennifer. I don't *want* to, but your parents' actions are *forcing* me to. I have to protect my *daughter*. I'm sure you like her a lot, and I'm sure that your parents put a lot of pressure on you to find a boy you could like, but Jocelyn isn't a *boy*. I think the way you feel about her is enough proof that she's a girl. *You* like her. If she *was* a boy, you wouldn't like her so much, but you'll have to find *another* girl to like."

Glowering at the two parents, Fred stiffened his resolve. "Take your daughter home and stop filling her head with superstitious *garbage* that some fairy sky king *hates* her for liking girls, or whatever nonsense you've been telling her!"

Vicky stood up to defend her daughter. "*Mr. Ryan!* We *love* our daughter and have already *accepted* that she's gay!"

"So you try to take the girl she likes and turn her into a boy to suit your evil prejudices?" Melanie barked back at her. "I hope Jennifer figures out soon what deluded *bigots* you are! Then she might get *away* from you two before you drive her to *kill* herself! Please leave or I'm calling the *police!*"

Trying to pull Jennifer away from Josh required both sets of parents to actually cooperate for a moment. Even as they helped literally rip Josh and Jennifer out of each other's arms, the Healys tried to plead for them to get a second opinion.

"*Please, Melanie!*" Vicky pleaded. "Just take Josh to a second psychiatrist without prejudice and..."

"Her name is *Jocelyn!*" Melanie shouted back. "Stop misgendering her!"

"Mr. Ryan!" John implored him. "You're a smart man! *Listen* to your son! He needs..."

"I have a *daughter!*" Fred shouted. "*Get out!*"

"*Jocelyn!*" Jennifer screamed. "*Jocelyn! Please!*"

The whole time Josh was once more in a fugue state, the whole world around him a blur of noises, movement, and the agony of losing Jennifer. *No! God? If you're real... please help me! Don't let them take her away from me! Please? Help me!*

Chapter 16 - The Hand of Fate

Josh was 'sick' the next week, which wasn't far from the truth as he was lost in a near constant fugue state. Friday came and he was taken down to Dr. Biggs's office and got his first three-month shot of puberty blockers. The next Monday, he went back to school and met Tracy at the bus stop.

"*Joss!*" she said excitedly as she ran up to him. "I tried calling you, but your mom said you were *sick!* Did I give you that awful cold? I'm sorry! You shouldn't have come to see me! I..." she paused when she noticed he was like a zombie. "*Joss? What's wrong?*"

"They... they made me stop seeing Jennifer." he nearly sobbed.

"Oh, *Jocelyn!*" Tracy gasped. "*Why? What happened?*"

Knowing she was just like his parents, wanting him to be a girl, he couldn't tell her what happened. Lacking the will to fight back, all he did was shrug.

"*Joss, you have to tell me!*" she insisted. "I'm your *BFF!* It's like a *law* or something!" She giggled in hopes that it would be infectious, but her laugh died when she saw it didn't work. "*Joss, please. Just tell me what happened.*"

He shrugged dismissively as the bus pulled up next to them. "It doesn't matter. *Nothing* matters."

Getting on the bus, Tracy moved to their usual seat so he could sit with her, but saw him instead take the empty seat up at the front of the bus. Just like the days Tracy had been sick, Josh rode to school alone.

For months, Josh only existed. He went to school, but he barely did any of his work, just drifting from class to class in utter despair. After reaching out for weeks on end with no response, Tracy inevitably stopped trying to get him to engage with life and the two began to drift apart. David had never

really reconnected with him, so even sooner the two friends ceased to even acknowledge one another. The two twins, who he'd practically grown up with, slowly became like all the other kids in the school; cold strangers.

Melanie and Fred were worried. When they'd forced the Healy family to have no further contact with Josh, they knew it would hurt him, but felt that after a while his attitude would rebound to be like it had been before he'd met them. Instead he just seemed to get worse with each passing day.

He found the first note in his locker the day he returned. Josh tried to read it, but hearing how much Jennifer missed and loved him hurt so much he just cried. Once home, he put it in the box where he'd put the other notes, including the love letter she'd written him.

Two more notes came that week, then three more the next week and each week that followed; one every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. He couldn't bear to read the words of tolerance, love, and hope. For him, there was none, especially hope. They went in the box unread because, as much as it hurt to ever read them, they were from Jennifer so he couldn't part with them.

He saw her sometimes, watching him as before as he went around the school pretending to be Jocelyn. The terrible sadness in her eyes was worse than having to pretend to be a girl. He wanted to go to her, but knew if he did his parents would punish the Healys, and he cared for them too much to do that.

Just after his thirteenth birthday that he spent alone, he came to school the next Monday and there was no note. There was also no Jennifer. No matter where he looked, she wasn't there. Worried, he hoped she wasn't too sick.

She never returned. After two weeks he realized she was gone and had no idea what happened to her and no way to find out if she was even still alive. He'd tried calling the Healy home from the solitary payphone out in front of the school, but their number had been disconnected. That was when he concluded that something terrible must have happened, and it was his fault.

It was then that the sadness that permeated him turned to anger.

He'd been on hormone blockers for six months when he got in his first fight. The boy had called him a sissy fag, and Josh slapped him hard enough to knock him to the floor. The school looked the other way because he'd been harassed and afforded him special privileges, but that only encouraged him. By the end of the school year he'd been sent to the office three more times and his grades were poor, but no matter how little work he did, his teachers passed him. The Principal ensured that 'Jocelyn', their first openly trans student, wouldn't be failed since it would make them look bad.

That summer he refused to go off to camp. Instead, he just spent the time hanging around the house and going for long walks alone.

Eighth grade was no better. If anything, it was worse. As his peers grew and developed, he remained the same; trapped in a body that wouldn't mature and in a life he hated but couldn't escape.

When he'd been on hormone blockers for a year, his parents tried to force him on female hormones.

Melanie was at her wit's end that October evening when she first brought it up. "*Jocelyn!* It's for your own *good!* You can't stay on blockers *forever!* You have to grow into a *woman!*"

Josh stared at her with a glare that would freeze steam. "*No!*"

"But *sweetheart*, they'll get you out of this horrible cycle of depression you're in!" she insisted. "I'm making the appointment!"

"Try and *make* me go, *Melanie!*" he spat. He hadn't called her 'Mom' since the day they'd forced him to stop seeing Jennifer. She in turn just excused it as his 'becoming her own person'.

"Oh, you'll *go!*" she stated boldly.

"Only if you tie me up and *drag* me there!" he sneered. "And if you *do* drag me there, I won't *talk* and I will *not* let them shoot me up!"

"*Jocelyn!* Why are you *fighting* me on this? We're just doing..."

"...whatever you *want* to do to me!" he interrupted her. "Like I'm some *doll* for you to dress up and put on display for your progressive cred! Look at *us!* Aren't we so *progressive?* We have a trans child!"

"You can't talk to me that way!" Melanie shouted.

"Why *not?* What're you gonna *do* about it, *Melanie?*" he scoffed.

"Just leave it be, Mel." Fred tried to defuse the situation. "Engaging at her level won't *change* anything. She's just being a teenage girl."

"*Fine.*" Melanie growled. "Ever since she went on blockers and fell out with Tracy she's been absolutely *impossible!*" Refusing to accept that his troubles had anything to do with the forced breakup, Melanie chose to blame his anti-social behavior on everything other than the truth.

When the subject came up again later that month and he refused HRT once more, he became suspicious she'd try to sneak it into his food. The following Monday he found a lunch made for him as he got ready for school.

"What's *this?*" he questioned her suspiciously. Melanie had *never* made him lunch, even when he was in Primary school, claiming it 're-enforced gender stereotypes' to expect her to make a lunch for her child.

"Oh. I... I made you *lunch*, sweetheart!" his mother stammered. "I... I was thinking that I could make some things *easier* for you, since you're having such a hard time lately, so you won't have to make your lunches anymore!"

"Nice *try*, Melanie!" he huffed as he tossed the bag in the garbage. "I'll get lunch at school." At that he stalked out the door in his black jeans and top; a style that was all he would wear of his considerable wardrobe. When he searched the house later that day while Melanie was at still work and Fred was practically hiding in his home office, he found the opened prescription bottles in his parents' room. He took them to the toilet and flushed them all.

After that Melanie became desperate and dragged him to therapy sessions with Dr. Williams. The first day Josh threatened to stab him with a pen for signing off on his transition after only a five-minute talk. Within a few visits though, he used the time as a bitch session to complain about school, the kids that snubbed him, his parents, and anything else that came to mind.

Eventually, the anger melted away, leaving only a severe depression in its wake. He started giving in on things. Slowly at first, but soon he was passing his classes legitimately and dressing more femininely again. He was back to just drifting through his days as he had been right after Jennifer had been literally ripped from his arms. His anger still unspent, it seethed inside him.

It suddenly snapped one day when Jason Dexter passed him in the hallway. He called Josh a name. Josh in turn sent the boy to the floor crying.

"*Jocelyn*?" Mr. Tanner said sadly as Josh sat in his office. "I'm going to have to suspend you for three days for this. I can't look the other way this time. I've called your father and he's on his way here to pick you up. I have to say, I'm *extremely* disappointed. What ever happened to the girl that was sweet, kind, and helpful like you *used* to be?"

"She's *dead*." Josh growled.

"I... I suppose that's just the anger talking. You escalated *way* too far this time, though." the man chided him. Seeing Fred enter his office, he sighed. "I'm very sorry about this, Mr. Ryan. *Jocelyn*'s suspended for three days. Please sign this form and take her home. She can come back next Tuesday."

Fred stopped halfway in the room. "*What?* No discussion? *What happened?*"

"She assaulted Jason Dexter, Mr. Ryan. She's *suspended*. Please just sign the form or I'll turn it over to the district legal department."

Resignedly, Josh's father signed the form. "Alright. Get your things, Jocelyn. I'll take you home."

Putting away in the rusty Microbus, Fred glanced over at Josh. "*Well?*"

"Asshole called me a fruitcake, so I kicked him in the nuts." he answered.

"I thought you worked though this with Dr. Williams." Fred whined. "I wish you'd start gender appropriate hormone therapy! It would help stabilize..."

"*No! No hormones!*"

"*Jocelyn, you have to start puberty!*" he begged. "*You're fourteen!*"

"I'll start when you let me off the *blockers*." he mumbled.

"*What?*" Fred asked, not having heard him over the car's engine.

"*Nothing.*" Josh spat. He knew trying to assert his masculinity again was just a waste of breath, so he didn't even bother to try.

When Melanie found out he'd been suspended, she scoffed. "*What?* They've never suspended her for standing up for herself *before!*" she cried. "*That school is to blame for all of her problems! They're bigoted and backwards, targeting Jocelyn just because she transitioned!*"

"Mel..." Fred countered softly. "You can't blame them *every* time something like this happens. Jocelyn is at least *partly* to blame."

"It's the *hormone* blockers!" she redirected. "They... they have *side* effects... emotional lability, aggression, depression... so it's not her fault! Those damn pharmaceutical companies! *Milking* their patients for every *dime* for drugs that are so loaded with side effects they're almost worse than the *disease*!"

Josh just lay on his bed in his room brooding. He'd long ago ripped down the girly canopy, the framing sitting there all around him like the bleached bones of a dead animal, almost a cage. He knew he'd overreacted. Jason Dexter was a know-it-all jerk, but he didn't deserve being attacked like that, even though the boy had mildly threatened Josh that one time. He was roused from his continued self-loathing by a knock at his door.

"Go *away*!" he shouted.

Trying the knob, Melanie found it locked. "*Jocelyn*, sweetie! It's *Mom*. Please let me in?"

"Go away, *Melanie*." he grumbled.

"Sweetheart, I *know* it's not your fault." she tried coddling him. "You were *provoked* and are suffering from severe social anxiety! It's not *your* fault!"

Rolling his eyes, he turned his back to the door. "Just leave me *alone*."

She tried bringing him dinner, but his paranoia prevented him from eating; certain that she'd laced his food with a new supply of estradiol.

The next day Melanie stayed home from work, something she hadn't done since Josh's first week of Junior High. He came down wearing his torn black jeans and ratty loose-fitting top, going to the kitchen to make breakfast. After they'd forced him on hormone blockers, he'd refused to drink the soy milk or eat anything with soy when he'd learned it contained phytoestrogens. His still pre-pubescent body could mistake them for real estrogens and begin a mild form of female puberty. It was something he'd ironically read on a

transgender forum intended for trans girls whose parents wouldn't let them get hormones. Instead he went to make some toast.

"*Jocelyn?*" Melanie said softly. "Would you come here, please?"

Turning around, he saw she was sitting at the dining room table with her usual cup of tea. "Why aren't you at work?" he asked suspiciously.

"I need to talk to you." she said gently. "*Please?*"

Rolling his eyes, he stalked over to the table and dropped heavily into the seat. "What *now*, Melanie?"

Clearing her throat, she only glanced up at him. "I've been talking with Dr. Williams about your... *problems*... lately."

"So much for doctor-patient confidentiality!" Josh jeered and rolled his eyes again, crossing his arms defiantly.

"Honey, I needed to know what's *wrong* with you, and now I understand." she said contritely. "You... you want to be able to have your own children. *I know* that it's bad to contribute to global overpopulation, but Dr. Williams explained it to me. It's actually a common issue with transgender girls. You... you'll never be able to carry a baby like *I* did, and that *hurts*. I understand."

Eyeing her with a dead expression, he snorted. "Sure. *That's* my problem!"

She sighed patiently at his sarcasm. "I know there are *other* issues, but I see now that this is why you've been so much against starting HRT! So, I talked it over with your father and... and we've decided that it's in your best interest for you to *skip* the shot of blockers you were scheduled to get next week."

Sitting forward, the tiny ember of hope that still clung to life in the frozen wasteland of his broken heart began to flare. Swallowing hard, he gaped at

her, hopeful over something for the first time in a year and a half. "You... you're going to let me become a *boy*?"

"*No, sweetie!*" she said sympathetically, willingly mistaking his eager tone for one of fear. "We'd *never* do that to you! We're just going to let your body develop enough to produce some... genetic material... have it harvested and frozen, and then you can be free to start HRT without any regrets!" Seeing the life die in his eyes, she thought he just didn't understand. "Don't you *see*? You'll be able to have your own children someday *and* become a woman! It's true that you won't be able to *carry* the baby, but your *partner* could! Assuming that you're still a *lesbian*, that is." She turned to study his reaction curiously. "Are you?"

Having the flicker of hope snatched away from him so dismissively, he answered absently. "*Yeah.*"

Smiling as though she'd just solved world hunger, Melanie got up. "*Alright then!* Dr. Biggs already knows and will need to see you once a month for a while, to monitor your progress. We don't want you developing *too* much! As soon as he thinks you're ready, you'll go down to a clinic, they'll get what they need, and then you can start HRT! I'm really *very* thrilled for you! Finally we can get *past* all this craziness and get you on the proper path!"

Months went by and Josh started feeling changes in his body. Excitedly he began to think that when he was to begin HRT he might somehow convince his parents he really was a boy. Just after school ended for the year and he was passed on to High School, Dr. Biggs told him that the time had come.

Josh went down to the clinic willingly. He didn't feel he had any reason to fear what they were going to do. When he was taken in to see the doctor, he was told he was being prepped for minor outpatient surgery.

"*Surgery?*" he asked curiously. "I..." He paused a moment and considered his words carefully. "That is, I didn't know I had to have surgery for this."

The attending doctor raised an eyebrow at that. "Jocelyn? Are you *certain* that this is what you want?"

With an embarrassed shrug, he looked away. "It's not a big deal. I mean, I thought it'd be done the 'old fashioned way' is all. Yeah, it's fine with me. I just want to get it over with and go home."

"You *have* her informed consent release, *Doctor!*" Melanie hissed. "You also have her psychiatrist's letter! If you *don't* proceed, I'll sue your whole *clinic* for discrimination... which *isn't* covered by malpractice insurance!"

Cowed by her threat, and having gotten a verbal acknowledgment from Josh, the physician nodded. "No need for that, Ms. Ryan. I'm required to verify patient consent prior to surgery, is all." Facing Josh, he smiled weakly. "No, we don't use the old-fashioned methods at this clinic, Jocelyn. Don't worry! It'll be quick and almost painless! We'll put you to sleep for a little bit, take what we need, then bandage you up and you'll be on your way home!"

It wasn't until Josh woke up afterward that he found out what the doctor had meant when he said they were going to 'take what they need'.

"You... you had me *castrated?*" he said with shock through a mind and body that were barely functional due to the anesthesia that was just wearing off.

"You would have done it eventually." Melanie said happily. "*This* way it's done, you don't have to take anti-androgens, and you have genetic material frozen for the future! Now, lie back and the doctor will let us know when we can take you *home!* You can start hormones *tonight!* Isn't it *exciting!*"

Josh blacked out. The next thing he knew he awoke in his bed wearing his *Little Mermaid* nightie, still fitting since he hadn't grown much in the last twenty-one months. Slowly becoming aware of his body, he felt a mild sting between his legs as it all came rushing back to him. Horrified, he felt down. Slowly pieces of the previous day came back to his mind.

He remembered his mother dressing him after the surgery, then the warm breeze as he was wheeled out to the microbus. Then he remembered her handing him some pills and him taking them. *It's too late.* he realized. *It's already started.* He lay back down and sobbed uncontrollably for hours.

By the time summer vacation ended, Josh was beginning to develop like a normal teen girl. He was also convinced that all hope was lost and stopped fighting his parents' efforts to push him through transition. He even took his pills without a fight. For most of the first month Melanie made him open his mouth and checked in his cheeks and under his tongue to make sure, but he just didn't care enough to try. He continued to see Dr. Williams, but instead of spending the time complaining as before, he spent it sitting there; ignoring the man and contemplating his own death.

Walking to school in his short denim skirt, tights, trainers, and V-neck top, the High School being less than a mile from his home, he was neither happy nor sad. He just existed. Finding his assigned locker, he absently went to his classes; first Math, then Biology, English, and Spanish. As he sat eating his lunch, he looked up to see a girl standing across the table from him.

"Mind if I *join* you?" she asked cheerily.

Cautiously, Josh nodded and gestured to the seat across from him as he chewed his salad.

"I'm Grace!" she greeted him enthusiastically. "What's *your* name?"

"Jocelyn." he said flatly. "You can call me Joss, if you want."

"Hi, Joss!" she chirped as she opened the small paper carton of milk. "Isn't High School *cool*? It's almost like being a grown up!"

"*Thrilling.*" he answered lifelessly.

"Are you *OK*?" she asked concernedly. "Did some senior girls pick on you, *too*? Some girl that thinks she's God's gift just 'cuz she's three years older tried to make me kiss her *shoes* in the bathroom! Man, if I didn't think I'd get suspended, I'd of punched her out! As it is, I just scrambled outta there!"

He shook his head sadly. "No, nothing like *that*. I just..." As he spoke, he spotted Tracy sitting at a table full of other girls, laughing happily. Sighing, he shrugged. "I just don't have any friends anymore."

"*Awe!*" Grace empathized. "I know how you feel. I don't *either*. Mom and I just moved here over the summer from San Diego. I don't know *anyone* here!" Taking a bite, she slowly stopped and swallowed before a smile grew on her face. "You and *I* could be friends!"

Seeing she was sincere and just trying to be friendly, he felt he owed it to her to have all the facts first. "Um... *thanks*, but you don't *wanna* be my friend. If you are, nobody *else* will be." He lowered his voice. "I... I'm *trans*."

Without a blink she asked, "No *kidding*? The way you dress I'd of never guessed you wanna be a boy! Your *mom* make you dress like that?"

"I'm male to female." he answered curiously, taking a bite of his sandwich.

"*Wow!*" she replied wide-eyed. "You'd never know it! You look *totally* hot! This T-girl in my old school, you could *tell*. Her parents were supportive and all, but she was, like, *built* like a boy, ya' know? Supposedly as she develops she'll look more girly, but *you*? You look like you were *destined* to be a girl, though! Like the hand of fate was pushing you that way all along!"

Shaking his head, his long light brown hair flowing around his shoulders, he laughed sardonically. "*Ha*. More like the hand of my *mother*! *She's* the one that pushed me to transition. I don't *care* anymore, really. It is what it is."

"Were you *afraid* to?" she asked quietly. "Like, afraid you'd get picked on?"

"I *was* picked on." he answered plainly. "A lot in seventh grade, but not as much last year. I also lost my two best friends." At that he peered up to see Tracy eye him, then turn away and pretend she hadn't seen him.

Grace turned, glanced at the table, then looked back at Josh. "Which ones?"

"The girl with the dark brown hair in the jeans and white top? That's Tracy." he sighed. "She *used* to be my BFF. I guess forever doesn't *last* very long anymore. Not that I *blame* her... I was kind of a *bitch* to her for a bit. She was pushing for me to transition, too. Her and her brother David, he's not here right now, *used* to be my best friends. Now I don't *have* any friends."

"I don't *get* it." Grace wondered. "OK, you were *scared*. It's understandable. It's a rough thing to be so different from everyone... let alone realizing that in *Middle School!* Still, they shouldn't of pushed 'til *you* were ready!"

While the two finished eating, he watched her. She was small, but not nearly as small as he was. Her honey blonde hair was in a pixie cut and her skin was like alabaster with only faint hints of a fading tan. Two large blue eyes stared back at him with kindness in them and not a hint of revulsion.

"Wanna go sit outside while the weather's nice?" Grace asked. "I hear you actually get *snow* here in the winter!"

Josh nodded and the two got up and dumped their garbage, walking out under Tracy's watchful gaze.

Sitting together on the grass behind some benches and soaking in the warm late summer rays, Grace turned to him. "Can I ask you a *personal* question?"

"Shoot." he answered with his eyes closed and his hands behind his head.

"Um... do you like boys, girls, both, *neither*?"

"Neither, really. Girls if I had to pick." he answered absently. In truth, Josh's heart was still locked away, mourning the loss of his beautiful Jennifer.

"That's cool. I'm Bi, but I've known asexual girls. They're usually easier to get along with! No like, hang-ups or drama with boy or girlfriends, dating issues, angst over unrequited crushes... blah, blah, blah!" she giggled, only to stop when she noticed he didn't join in. Silence passed between them before Grace spoke again. "*Joss?* Do you care that I think you're cute?"

Sighing inwardly, he felt the empty half of his heart ache in loneliness. "*No.* I don't mind. I *know* I'm pretty, you like girls. It just sorta happens, I guess."

"*Cool!*" she said with a smile. "Not that I'm like, asking you out or *hitting* on you or anything! I respect your boundaries! It's just cool!"

As the bell rang ending lunch break, the two got up and dusted themselves off. "Listen, I have R.O. next period. You?"

"PE. What's *are oh?*" he asked.

"*R.O.T.C.?*" she annunciated each letter. "It's *totally* cool! I don't gotta take PE and I bet I look *fabulous* in uniform!" she said, striking a glamorous pose.

Josh honestly giggled for the first time in nearly two years. Catching himself and feeling self-conscious about it, he suppressed it and put his hand over his mouth. "*Sorry!* I didn't mean to laugh!"

Blushing, Grace touched Josh's shoulder as they walked toward the freshman lockers. "It's OK! I *like* your laugh! I think I'll try and make you laugh more just to *hear* it!" When he stopped at his locker and got out his pink bag, she snorted. "*My* turn to be sorry! I didn't mean to laugh at your bag. It's just..."

"...*really* girly. I *know.*" Josh sighed as he hoisted it onto his right shoulder. Following Grace to her locker, he waited. Getting out a black bag, identical

to his old one, he smiled at the happy memory of when his parents had only pushed him to date boys. "I like *your* bag." he complimented her.

Blushing again, she looked away shyly. "*Thanks!* Mom found it in a second hand store last week. It's a little used, but *sturdy!* I like it!"

Josh examined it closely and noticed the tiny scrapes on the rainbow across the back that made his eyes go wide.

Seeing his reaction, Grace furrowed her brow. "What's *wrong?*"

Collecting himself, he took a breath. "That... that *bag*. It... it used to be *mine*. Back in sixth and seventh grade. I guess Melanie, my *mother*, gave it to the second hand store over the summer."

"How do you know it's yours?" she asked as they headed toward the gym.

"The scrapes on the rainbow?" he explained. "I took it the last time I went to summer camp before going to Middle School and scraped it on some trees. I'd know that pattern of scratches *anywhere!*"

"Are you *serious?*" she asked. "Holy cannolies! Talk about the hand of *fate!* What're the odds of *that?*"

The two giggled together before separating at the gym doors. "See you later, Grace!" Josh said almost happily.

"Catch ya' *'round*, beautiful!" she answered back with a finger point before she began jogging down the hall toward the ROTC classrooms.

Chapter 17 - Beware the Ides of March

Turning in place and looking at himself in his closet mirror, Josh sighed at the utter futility of looking anything like a boy. He'd bought some boy's clothes in a department store; a pair of jeans, a T-shirt, and a baseball cap. Even with his hair tucked up in the cap and his still-growing breasts strapped down with an ace bandage, the image he saw reflected in his mirror looked like a pre-teen girl wearing boy's clothes. Once he took off the cap and his hair spilled out, the vision was complete and he would even be hard-pressed to say they were boy clothes. On him, he felt they still looked girly.

Putting them away, he got back to the business at hand, namely trying on the dress that he was supposed to wear to the Spring Fling in two weeks. He thought it funny that the fifteenth was still five days before the official start of spring, but the name of the dance wasn't that important. That he was going was. That he was going with Grace even more so.

He and Grace had become good friends quickly. They actually had quite a lot in common, most notably that they both loved musicals. Josh had her over to his house many times to watch dozens of his or her favorites since the start of the school year when they'd met. They would invariably take twice as long as the movie length to watch each one, he or she always pausing the video to expound on some point of trivia.

They also shared a disdain for Melanie. While Fred wasn't bad, Melanie was constantly trying to push Josh into being more flirty with Grace, suggesting more revealing outfits or referring to the two as a couple. During the winter break, Melanie had finally gone too far.

The two lay on the living room floor next to each other watching State Fair as Melanie wandered in and sat on the couch behind them. When the movie ended and the two began to get up, they finally noticed she was there.

"Oh. Hello, Mrs. Ryan." Grace said, knowing it would grate on her nerves.

"Grace, please." she moaned, "I've told you before, it's Ms. Ryan... or Melanie... or even better, just Mel!"

"Sorry, Mrs. Ryan." she twisted the knife. "Hard habit to break! My dad drilled it into me, but good! I'll try harder."

Sighing in frustration, Melanie put the issue aside and smiled at the two. "It's quite late, Grace. After ten. Since you two don't have school tomorrow, I called your mother and asked if you could just stay the night and she said you could! You can borrow one of Jocelyn's nightgowns!"

"Melanie!" Josh shouted. "Why do you have to do stuff like that! It's not your place to be asking Mrs. Wright if Grace can stay over!"

"Sweetheart, I was only thinking of Grace's safety! It's not safe to be out after ten for a pretty young girl like Grace! Besides, I thought it would give you two a chance to get closer... to... bond!"

His jaw falling open at the brazen insinuation from his mother, Josh was speechless. Fortunately, Grace wasn't.

"Mrs. Ryan, I like Joss!" she admitted. "A lot! Hell, I'd marry her! And I can too, 'cuz she's still legally male which would be totally awesome! But she's not into me and that's cool!"

"But Grace, dear," Melanie retorted, "Jocelyn sometimes needs help to not pass up the opportunities available to her! It was like pulling teeth getting her to stop pretending to be a boy... and getting her on gender appropriate hormone therapy was a battle in itself. Still, she always saw in the end that I knew what was best for her, so I was just hoping to push her along in the proper direction again! You two make such a cute couple!"

Grace narrowed her eyes at Melanie. "Mrs. Ryan, we're not a couple, and Joss is not some helpless girl who needs her mother to set up dates for her!"

If you push her to date me, I'll turn her down flat! She's nobody's pity date and she doesn't need you to set her up!"

"I wasn't suggesting that she was, Grace!" Melanie shot back. "And I don't like being accused of pushing my daughter on you!"

Smiling and dropping her tone to one sweet as pie, she retorted, "Then stop trying to pimp her out!"

Melanie fumed at the accusation. "I think it best if you leave and never..."

"Mel." Fred interrupted her as he entered the room. "Don't say it. I'll just have to invite her back."

"Fred! Didn't you hear what that girl..." she argued.

"I did, Mel." he said calmly. "She was crude, but right, at least in principle. Jocelyn doesn't need you or anyone to push her into dating. She can make her own choices in her own time. Leave. It. Be." He rarely if ever opposed his wife about anything, but when he did he was immovable on the issue.

Seeing he was not going to budge and that she was outnumbered, Melanie stormed off in a huff. "Fine! I'm only her mother and trying to look out for her best..." her voice faded as she retreated into the master bedroom.

"Thanks for the backup, Mr. Ryan." Grace said appreciatively.

"I was only looking out for Jocelyn." he answered honestly. "Mel was butting into an area that's none of her business. She knows that, but it's sometimes hard to not want to help your child... especially a girl like Jocelyn. If you're crude about it again though, I won't stop her from throwing you out."

Josh was completely mortified. His mother had not only tried to see to it that Grace stayed the night, but was actually pushing the two of them to have sex.

"I am so sorry, Grace!" he apologized. "Melanie was way out of line! I... I'd understand if you decided not to come over anymore."

"Nah!" Grace dismissed the offer. "You have a bigger TV than ours!" Seeing that it made Josh smile a little, she wrapped the small boy in a friendly hug. "Come on! Fuhgetaboutit! Who's my best friend? Huh? You! Are we gonna hafta watch Xanadu on that dinky screen at my place?"

Josh rolled his eyes. "Ugh! Are you still holding me to that? Xanadu is not a classic musical!"

"Hey, you made me watch Easter Parade last month! That sappy thing made my teeth hurt!" Releasing him, she held out a hand. "Walk me to the door?"

"If she won't, I will." Fred offered as he grabbed his keys. "I'm driving you home, Grace."

"It's like six blocks from here!" she argued. "If I can walk down Washington Boulevard in the City of Commerce, I can walk a few blocks in northeast Ohio! Anyone messes with me, they get an eye-full of my left jab!" Taking a fighting stance, she covered properly and snapped out with her left hand with lightning speed. Relaxing and bouncing on the balls of her feet with a grin, she smiled sweetly. "Aren't I such a girly-girl!"

While Josh still brooded nearby, Fred burst out laughing before his tone turned serious. "That's all well and good, but..."

"Mr. Ryan, please." she interrupted. "My father taught me self-defense from the time I was three until... well, right up until the end. I probably could take you. Compared to me, you're old and out of shape... no offense. I'll jog home and be there before you can even get that heap of yours out of the driveway!"

"Hey!" he said defensively. "That's a classic car!"

"Yeah, well it needs a valve job and a hundred dollar visit to Earl Scheib's." she countered. "I'll be fine, Mr. Ryan! I'll text when I get home so you know I'm safe, OK?" Seeing Fred relent and head off to follow Melanie, she turned to Josh and took his hand again, pulling him toward the front entry. "Call me tomorrow?" she asked.

Nodding and smiling, he sighed. "I will." Opening the door, he looked up at his only friend as she put on her jacket. "Did you mean all that stuff? I mean, that stuff you said to Melanie? About me?"

Moving to the porch together, Grace groaned as her breath floated away in the cold. "Oh! You just don't know, do you girl?" Glancing away, she put her hands in her jacket pockets to keep them warm. "Yeah Joss, I like you. A lot. You're smart, funny, and pretty as hell! I was crushing on you after talking to you for like five minutes!" Leaning against the railing while Josh stood in front of the closed door in a pink cardigan and white capris, she shook her head. "So yeah, I want to stay... with you... in your room with the door locked and music blaring so no one can hear you scream like a banshee! I admit it! You're hot! Who wouldn't want to?" With a short pause she added, "But..."

Josh exhaled heavily, his breath visibly joining Grace's. "...but I just, I can't!" he cried. He liked Grace. She was a great friend and there was so much about her that he was attracted to. But she's not Jenn. he sighed inwardly.

"Someday, you gotta tell me who it was that broke your heart so bad." Grace lamented as she pushed off the railing back onto her feet and wrapped her arms around Josh. "Not tonight, though. I gotta scram." Making her way down the flagstone walkway backwards, she waved goodbye to Josh before turning and running for home.

*Picking up the pink pastel dress, he pressed it up against himself and looked in the mirror. *I look like a friggin' Barbie doll*, he huffed. After having sorted through dozens of options at a local shop, Melanie had ordered the dress in his size as they didn't stock that style in child's size twelve. Still only four-*

foot-ten and just under ninety pounds, he looked closer to twelve or thirteen rather than fifteen, having missed nearly two years development on top of being naturally small. When Grace asked him to go to the Spring Fling with her, he'd almost said no, but her pleading eyes just couldn't be refused.

Trying on the dress, he found he had enough of a chest to fill the bust nicely but worried that the off-shoulder style was too *risqué*. The way it hugged his waist and showed off his developing curves was undeniable, though. The dress was perfect. Hanging it back up, he got re-dressed in his girl's jeans and top and plopped down on his bed. Looking up at the powder blue canopy that looked much more mature than the childish pink canopy he'd torn down and ripped up, he heard his new smartphone chime.

Rolling over and plucking it off his nightstand, he saw it was a text from Grace and smiled.

hey gf!

Josh typed his reply quickly.

Hey there! What's up?

just hangin. wondering if my girl was up 4 sum company!

Sighing, Josh typed back.

Anytime, Grace. You know you don't need to ask.

A moment later, he saw the response.

k! b rite their! :kiss:

Rolling his eyes at her lazy text, he got up and fixed his hair and makeup. He knew he didn't have to, he just felt it was the right thing to do anytime

she came over. *If I gotta be a girl, I don't have to be a slob!* Heading down the stairs, he waited on the couch until he heard knocking. Getting back up he shouted, "Come on in, Grace!"

Entering, she looked Josh up and down. After closing the door, she wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "*God, girl! You're gorgeous!*"

Pulling her arm from around him like a dance move as he ducked under it, he wagged a finger at her. "Watch that now, Grace!"

"Oh, I'm *watchin'* it, alright!" she said as she looked at Josh's rear end as he walked away from her. "You sure you were *ever* a boy?" she joked.

"Ha. *Ha.*" Josh said as he started up the stairs. "Come *on*. It came today."

"An invitation to the *inner sanctum*?" she said almost reverently as her eyes followed his swaying hips up the steps. "How can I *resist*?"

Showing her the dress, Josh held it up against himself. "Think it'll be OK?"

Almost salivating that Josh was going to be her not-really-a-date to the spring dance wearing that dress, Grace nodded. "Yeah. I'll hafta go *armed* though!"

"*Laughable.*" Josh sneered as he hung the dress up. Moving to sit on the bed, he sighed. "Listen. Remember last December when you asked me who broke my heart?" Seeing her nod, he took a breath as his voice turned sad. "Her... her name was Jennifer... and she didn't *break* my heart... she *stole* it."

Sitting next to him, Grace took his hand. "It's *OK*. Just go *slow*."

After getting Grace to promise to not interrupt until he was done, Josh took hours recounting the horror story of his Middle School years. By the time he'd finished, tears had ruined his makeup and he had a pile of tissues on the floor at his feet.

"And when I woke up, I found out she'd had me *castrated!*" he bawled. "I... I was *devastated*, Grace!"

"*Wait.*" she finally said. "Is it OK to talk now?" Seeing him nod as he silently cried, she took a breath. "You mean to tell me that you *never* wanted to be a girl? That your parents *did* that *to* you without your consent? Isn't that like, *illegal* or something? *Child* abuse?"

Shaking his head, he took a ragged breath. "*No!* They have that damn letter from Dr. Williams saying I'm TG, so it's all *legal*, just completely *wrong!*"

"So... then you're really a *boy*? In your *head* I mean?"

"I don't know *what* the hell I am!" he cried. "I'm so messed up it's not even funny! I... I've always *looked* like a girl, even before HRT! I... I giggle, I *talk* like a girl, I *write* like a girl, I even *move* like a girl! I always *have!*"

"But you're a *boy.*" Grace stated. "You are because you *say* you are!"

Sniffing and dabbing at his eyes, he sighed; glad to get it out of his system. "But... as I was *going* to say... it doesn't matter. It's too late to *fix* anything. I've been on HRT for most of a year, I've lost my... um..."

"...*balls.*" Grace answered for him crudely with a smile, making Josh giggle lightly. "*Wow.* This is just so..." Standing up, she began to pace the room. Turning to look back at him, she could only ask the one thing that had been on her mind since Josh's terrible story had begun. "So... this Jennifer. Was she *pretty?*"

Smiling and crying simultaneously, he nodded his head. "*Beautiful!* And kind, caring, selfless... and... and she *loved* me. I mean, she loved *me!* *Josh!*"

"I thought you said she was gay?" she asked, sitting down next to him.

He nodded and wiped his nose. "It's *complicated*. She... she wanted me to stay a girl, but loved me enough to want me to be *myself*." Lowering his head, he sighed. "I loved *her* so much I was willing to be a girl for her, but..."

"...but the Harpy strikes again!" Grace quipped. "*God!* That woman is *insane!* I can only believe that she literally *ripped* you two apart because I've actually *met* her! That was *beyond* cruel, Joss!"

Neither said anything for a few moments while Grace worked up the courage to ask her next question. "You... you still *love* her... *don't* you?"

Getting up and pacing the room, Josh admitted the truth. "How can I *not*? Jenn... she was willing to do *anything* for me, and she was... she was just... *wonderful*." he said wistfully.

Grace got up and hugged her best friend, holding him for several minutes.

Finally separating, he shook his head. "I'm sorry I'm such a *mess*, Grace. I just felt... well... you needed to know the *whole* story. About *me*, I mean. I understand if you don't want to go with me to the dance... or even if you don't want to be my friend anymore. I mean, I'm a *freak!* A boy pretending to be a girl trapped in a boy's body that's turning into a girl?" He stepped away from her before facing his closet mirror, his expression contorting into one of pure disgust, and shouted, "*Freak!*"

Grace stormed up to him and took him by the elbows. "Don't you *ever* say that about my best friend ever again, Joss! You *hear* me? *Ever!*"

Breaking into sobs, Josh collapsed into Grace's arms and cried. She could only hold him and pet his head, trying to comfort him as best she could as she started to cry herself. Finally, after several minutes holding each other, Josh pulled away slightly and looked up at her. "Thank you." he whispered as he dried his tears with another tissue.

"For *what*?" Grace asked as she wiped away tears from her own cheeks with her sleeve. "For *being* here for you? What *else* could I do?"

Josh looked into her eyes and saw the longing in them. He knew she wanted to say more, to do more, but she'd kept it back for his sake. Having told her his truth, he could see in Grace's gaze that she still wanted him. Moving in closer, Josh tilted his head to one side and closed his eyes, leaning forward until his lips met hers. Kissing her gently, he opened his eyes to see she was staring at him wide-eyed.

"Wh... why'd you do that, Joss?" she asked after taking a moment to collect and calm herself.

Josh smiled knowingly. "A few minutes ago, you held me because you knew *I needed* it. That was because I knew *you* needed it."

Grace was overwhelmed. She'd dreamed about kissing this beautiful 'girl' for months, and now when he was so vulnerable, her beautiful boy had kissed her first. "Joss, I... I want to do that *again*, but..."

"...but I'm not *ready*, I know." he admitted. Leaning in to lay his head against her chest, wrap his arms around her, and close his eyes, he continued as much to himself as to Grace. "I have to learn to let go of the past that I can't change. Jennifer's gone and I have no way of getting her back. I guess *someday* I'll stop loving her so much that I'll be able to..."

"*No*." Grace interrupted him. "You'll *never* stop loving her, Joss. For the rest of your *life*, you'll love her. She deserves nothing less. She *earned* that love by the way she loved *you*. *Never* forget that."

"So..." he sighed, "...I guess I'll just live *alone*. Good thing I like *cats*!"

Leading him over to sit on the bed again, Grace sat close and held his hands in hers. "*No*, Joss. You'll love again. It'll just be different. My dad once told

me that *every* person we love is a unique thing unlike any other. Loving *one* person doesn't take away the love you have for *another*. You think parents with two kids have to stop loving their *oldest* when they have a new baby? You think when a couple falls in love that they suddenly feel *nothing* for the people they've loved in the past? *No*. You'll love again, and you'll *never* stop loving Jennifer. That's just the way things *work*."

Josh suddenly remembered something from the second time he'd gone to church. It was so beautiful, he'd memorized it and began to recite it. "*Love is patient, love is kind. It doesn't envy, it doesn't boast, it isn't proud. It doesn't dishonor others, it's not self-seeking, it's not easily angered, and it keeps no record of wrongs. Love doesn't delight in evil, but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.*"

"*Love never fails.*" the two chorused.

"You know the verse?" Josh asked blinking.

"It's only like one of the most famous Bible quotes *ever*, Joss!" Grace said with a giggle. Seeing her friend feeling better, she sighed. "So you see, I'm *still* your friend, right?" she asked. Seeing Josh nod she added, "As for the dance? Of *course* I wanna go with the prettiest girl there!"

"Even if she's not really your *date*?" he asked. "Or a *girl*?"

"Even if your name was Dirk *Slabchest*!" Grace joked. "But *only* 'cuz you're so damn *adorable*!" Laughing together she added, "Of course, it'd be an absolute *crime* not to wear that *dress*! Tell you what. *You* wear that dress with me on Saturday, and *I'll* call off the Olivia Newton John marathon! No *Xanadu* or *Grease*!"

Getting up and retrieving the dress once more, he held it up to himself and looked in the mirror. "For *you*?" he turned and smiled at her. "*Deal*!"

That Saturday night, Grace's mother Judy dropped the two off at the school. While Josh wore the pink pastel dress that only came down to just past his knees and left his shoulders bare, Grace wore a dark blue satin halter-style dress that covered her from neck to ankle, only leaving her arms and upper back bare. As they went in, a school councilor stopped them.

"Jocelyn *Ryan*?" he asked Grace.

The girl stepped up while Joss stopped dead in his tracks and watched wide-eyed. "Who wants to know? Looking for *autographs*?"

Examining the two, and not knowing either student by sight, he concluded by her question that Grace was Jocelyn. "I'm afraid you can't come in dressed like that... *Miss*."

"Why *not*?" she asked incredulously, checking over her dress before turning back to him. "Clashes with my *skin tone*?"

The councilor looked at her pleadingly. "Please, *Miss Ryan*. Go home and change into a *suit* like all the *other* boys. You're being *disruptive*."

"Oh, this is too *funny*!" Grace tried to hold back a giggle. "I'm *Grace Wright*, you idiot! Wanna see my student ID?" She got it out and showed him.

Looking it over, the slightly heavysset man handed it back and blinked at her. "But... why did you say you were..."

"I *didn't*, you *Neanderthal*!" she interrupted him angrily. "You asked if I *was*, I asked who wants to know, then you *assumed* I was! That's *your* fault!"

Looking at her and sighing exasperatedly, he glanced up at Josh and didn't even ask, thoroughly convinced that he was a girl just on sight and already embarrassed by his error. "*Sorry* about that, ladies. Have fun."

The two entered the gymnasium, Grace still fuming about the councilor's attempt to bar Josh from the dance. Seeing dozens of kids already dancing, she insisted they join in, trying to improve her mood. A short time later when a slow song came on, Josh looked at Grace for a moment and hesitated. He knew she liked him and would like nothing more than a slow dance with him, and he wanted to as well, but the nagging voice in the back of his head just wouldn't stop. *What would Jenn say, seeing you dancing with another girl?*

When he started moving off the dance floor though, he was stopped by an answer. *She'd be happy for you stupid! She's not here... Grace is. She loved you enough to want you to be able to be yourself, even though she loved the girl.* Looking back at Grace, he could tell she was disappointed and hiding it. Fearing that they'd be thrown out for being two 'girls' dancing a slow dance together, he was about to chicken out anyway when he saw two other girls take to the floor. Letting some of his grief and loss go, he smiled at Grace and approached her. "*Dance with me?*" he asked.

Grace didn't need to be asked twice. Taking the lead position, she placed her left hand on Josh's waist and took his left in her right. Swaying to the slow song, the two stared in each other's eyes and smiled, oblivious to everything around them. When the song ended, the two moved off the floor to rest.

Sitting next to him, Grace took his hand and asked a simple question. "*Why?*"

Smiling weakly, he glanced at her shyly. "Because love doesn't envy." he said in a breathy tone. "*I like you Grace! I have for a while now. Yes, I still love Jennifer, but she and I aren't together anymore and probably never will be. I... I think she'd be happy for me, that I found someone who knows me and still likes me! That, if she can't be here, you can, so... so I'm not alone!*" Seeing her processing what he'd said, he finished. "I don't know where I am right now. I know I *like* you and like being *near* you. Can that be enough for now?"

Letting out a patient sigh, Grace nodded. "*For now? Let's dance!*"

The next Monday at school, Josh took a moment to see the school councilor that had questioned Grace. Knocking on his door, he waited until he heard the invitation.

"Come in!" Derek Grayson shouted. It was his open time when students could come to him with any questions or concerns about their classes, so he was expecting another complaint about the PE curriculum or some math teacher. "Can I help you *Miss...*"

"*Ryan.*" he stated as he sat down. "*Jocelyn Ryan.*" He then waited to see if the name would register with the school administrator.

"Ryan... Ryan..." he mumbled as he looked at his computer records. Before he could locate the child's file, he stopped cold and slowly turned his head to look at him again.

"You were looking for me at the dance on Saturday." he stated. "I waited to see if you would ask who I was. You didn't, so I didn't volunteer information that would see me *discriminated* against."

Struck speechless, he only managed to mumble, "But... you *can't* be..."

Shaking his head dismissively, Josh pulled out several printed papers and placed them on the man's desk. "I *am*. That having been established, I'd like to direct your attention to this court case, *Doe versus Yunits* from eight years ago. In their ruling, the court stated that a school trying to prohibit a female transgender student from wearing female clothes was sexual discrimination and a violation of her rights to freedom of expression."

When he saw the councilor's jaw drop at the information, he pressed forward. "Here is a copy of the letter from a psychiatrist saying I'm transgender, which should already be on file in my school records. Lastly, here's a copy of the school district's policy that prohibits school staff from discriminating against any student on the basis of sexual orientation or identity."

Standing up, Josh leaned in over the desk. "Whoever told you to keep me out of the dance *isn't* the person who my parents will sue and see to it they lose their *job* the next time you try to deny me my rights, Mr. Grayson. I personally don't *care*. I'd have been *happy* to comply with your demands, were that possible, but I *did* notice that you didn't stop any of the stoner girls who were there wearing guy's flannels and jeans. My friend Grace was *very* upset by it though, and I *won't* see her hurt like that again. Do we understand each other?"

Not used to being talked to that way by a student, he tried to recover. "Now see here..."

"So then I should just have my parents call their lawyer." Josh interrupted. "I see. Good *day*, Mr. Grayson." At that he turned to leave.

Seeing him walking away, Derek stammered in a panic. "*Wait!*" When Josh turned around and looked at him through the open door, the school councilor wanted to fight the child's threat, but his better sense kicked in. "*Alright.*" he nodded. "I'll... I'll look into this and let you know what I find."

Nodding in satisfaction, Josh was about to leave again when Mr. Grayson stopped him once more.

"*Wait!* Just a *moment!*" he shouted. Seeing Josh come back to the office door, he shook his head. "Why can't you just be a *normal* boy?"

Thinking a moment, Josh stared him squarely in the eyes. "That's an *excellent* question, Mr. Grayson. *Call* me when you find out the answer!"

Chapter 18 - Right or Wrong

As the school year came to a close, Josh and Grace were getting closer to one another, but he continued to struggle with his feelings while still clinging to the memory of his love for Jennifer and all that she'd tried to do for him. No matter how many times he tried to look at it, he couldn't figure out what the right thing to do was.

Exactly three months after the day of the dance, he found himself dressed in a conservative white floral dress and walking from the bus stop to the church on Spring Drive. He hadn't been to any church since the Sunday he'd lost Jennifer, but he was drawn to return that day and to that church in particular. As he approached, he saw Pastor Roberts standing in the doorway greeting members of the congregation as usual, just as though no time had passed.

Clearing his throat, he walked up and smiled. "H... hello, Pastor Roberts."

Taking a moment, the man's smile lessened somewhat as he searched his memory to identify the apparent young woman who'd greeted him. He knew the face was familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. Recovering, he greeted Josh anyway. "*Hello!*" Taking Josh's hand, he shook it gently and admitted defeat. "I'm *sorry*... I know I *should* know you, but I just can't quite place..."

"*That's* alright, Pastor Roberts." Josh blushed. "It was *years* ago. I was only twelve and came to church with..."

Suddenly a light came into his eyes and he smiled broadly. "*Jocelyn!* The girl who came with the Healys!" Remembering the months that followed her visits, his happy grin diminished. "I was sad to see you stop coming. So were the Healys. When I asked after you, they said that your parents forbid you to come with them." Thinking a moment, he frowned. "You're fifteen now, right?" Seeing the finely dressed boy nod, he shook his head. "Jocelyn, I should warn you that if your parents are still denying you the right to attend church, you could get in a lot of trouble if they find out you've been here."

"It's *alright*, Pastor." Josh smiled weakly. "My parents never forbade me to come to *church*. They just forbade me from associating with the *Healys*. They felt Vicky and John were trying to... *influence* me. Are they *here*?"

He shook his head sadly. "No, they moved away a short time later." Looking at his watch, he glanced inside. "I need to get in and start services. You're welcome, of course!"

"That's why I'm *here*!" Josh said with a breath of relief. As the two entered the church together, he touched the pastor's arm a moment. "*Pastor*? Could I talk to you after services?"

Nodding with a gentle smile, he placed his hand on Josh's shoulder. "*Of course*, Jocelyn. I'll see you afterwards!" Heading for the pulpit, Josh slid into one of the rear pews and was warmly greeted by an older couple.

Once again enjoying the happy camaraderie of the congregation, he sat and listened to Pastor Roberts' sermon, *The Meaning of Salvation*. After that the assembled faithful sang, celebrating their time together before the services ended. As he stood aside waiting for the others to leave, he saw the pastor wave him forward. Picking his way through the crowd and seats, Josh walked up to the man, standing with a woman about the same age as the pastor.

"*Jocelyn*?" he began, "I'd like you to meet my wife, Susan. *Susan*? This is Jocelyn, that girl that I told you about a few years ago? The one that came with the Healy family to see what church was like?"

Susan Roberts smiled in recollection of the story her husband had told her about Josh and gently shook his hand. "A *pleasure* to meet you, Jocelyn!" the woman beamed. "So glad you could join us again!"

Looking at Josh, Daniel Roberts nodded toward the side of the sanctuary. "We can talk in my office." he said as he headed toward a door. Going through and holding the door for Josh, Daniel led him into a room with a

large desk overflowing with papers. Indicating a couch off to the side, he stood and waited for the youth. "*Please*, have a seat, Jocelyn."

The fifteen-year-old sat on the old piece of furniture, its upholstery of forest green having seen better days and smelling slightly of dust. He watched as the man sat in an easy chair adjacent to and slightly facing the couch.

"So, what is it you wanted to talk to me about?"

Taking a breath, Josh looked at the battered coffee table that sat in front of his feet. "Well, I... I have some *questions*. I was hoping you might help me figure some things out."

"Does it have anything to do with the Healys and why they left?"

"*No*." Josh answered before slightly reversing his answer. "Well, not *really*. I guess it's more of a question of what's the right thing to do about something. It's sorta complicated and... um... well, like when two people really like each other... and um..."

Seeing that he was showing signs of embarrassment, Daniel held up a hand. "Jocelyn. *First* of all, I want you to know that anything we talk about is *strictly* between us. I would *never* share that information with *anyone*, unless it presented a danger, to others or yourself. Secondly, if this is a matter of relationships and romance and you'd be more comfortable talking to another woman, Susan is a *wonderful* listener and she'd be more than happy..."

Josh shook his head, making the pastor halt his offer mid-sentence. "No... no thank you, Pastor Roberts. I... I don't *know* her. I know *you* and I trust *you* to have good judgement. I'm sure your wife is a wonderful woman, but... if you don't mind, it's *your* perspective I'd like to hear."

Nodding in understanding, Daniel sat back. "Alright. I'll do what I can."

Taking another breath, Josh tried again. "Well... *OK*, let's say one person likes another. They fall in love, but then they can't see each other anymore. Then one of them, who still loves the other, meets someone new who likes *them*. Is it a betrayal of their love to begin a *new* relationship? I mean, what if she starts to go out with the new person and then she finds out that the other person still loves her and is hurt because they feel *betrayed*? I guess I just want to know if it's ethical to give up on a relationship that has little to no chance of ever being rekindled, or if it's hurtful to 'move on', as it were."

Taking a breath, the man parsed the convoluted question, combined it with other things he knew, and put the pieces of a nearly three-year-old puzzle together. "*Jocelyn*, I understand your desire to be discreet, and I *applaud* you for doing so, but let's dispense with the hypothetical and get to what you're *really* asking. You and Jennifer Healy had *feelings* for one another. *Correct*?"

Fear gripped Josh's heart as his blood ran cold. Looking away toward the door, he was nearly overcome with a desire to run, but made himself face the question. "W-why would you ask *that*?"

Shaking his head slowly, Daniel chuckled lightly. "I have eyes to *see* with and ears to *hear* with, *Jocelyn*. After you stopped coming, Jennifer was... an empty shell. *Physically* present, but spiritually *absent*. At the time, I thought it might be because you two had some sort of falling out, but I recognized the signs of her being lovesick and heartbroken. I thought maybe she had a boyfriend and *they'd* had a falling out. I never would have *guessed* that... well... that *you* were the reason for her depression."

Getting up, he paced the room a moment. "*Jocelyn*, this is an Evangelical church... that is, it isn't associated with any denomination. As such, we *have* no position on the question of same-sex couples. It's simply never come *up*. If you ask me *personally* I'd say it's wrong, but I know I'm in no position to pass judgement on the hearts of my fellow man... *or* woman, in this case." He stopped and turned to Josh. "It wasn't until you asked your question that I was finally able to understand what made Jennifer... *do*... what she *did*."

Standing up, Josh quickly walked up to him. "Do *what*, Pastor? What *did* happen to Jennifer? *Please!* You *have* to tell me!" His eyes were wild with fear as his imagination ran through thousands of horrible scenarios.

Blinking slowly, he gestured to the couch. "*Please* Jocelyn, sit with me." Leading the teenager back to the couch, Daniel helped him to sit and took a place next to him. Placing his hand on Josh's, he took a breath. "*Jocelyn*, Jennifer tried to commit suicide a few months after you stopped coming."

The shock washed over Josh like a wave. He felt dizzy and his vision blurred. The next thing he knew, he was lying on the couch with Susan standing over him, looking down at him concernedly.

"What... what *happened?*" he asked as he sat up.

"You seem to have *fainted*, Jocelyn." she said sympathetically. She moved next to him and helped him to sit up, handing him a cup of water. "*Here*. Drink this."

Taking the offered liquid, he sipped it slowly. "Thank you." he said barely above a whisper.

Sitting next to him, Susan looked worried. "It's *fine*, Jocelyn. You had a bad shock. It's perfectly normal that you would react like that." Seeing the color starting to return to his cheeks, she inquired delicately, "You look like you're feeling a little better. Did you want to talk to Daniel again? He's out in the sanctuary, straightening up."

Nodding, Josh sat up the rest of the way, putting his feet back on the floor. "Yes please, Mrs. Roberts."

"*Please*, call me Susan!" she insisted. "I'll go get Daniel. You just sit and *rest* a moment, alright?" Getting up, she left him in the room alone.

Jennifer? Suicide? he pondered. Needing more information, he sat waiting until he saw Pastor Roberts come back in the office. Standing impatiently, he struggled for understanding as he wrung his hands nervously. "Pastor Roberts! What *happened* to Jennifer? You simply *must* tell me!"

"*Please!*" he said in a compassionately raised voice. "Jocelyn, sit *down!* I barely caught you from falling off the couch last time!" Seeing Josh sit once more, he sat back down in the easy chair. "I can't tell you *everything*, only what John Healy told me to tell the congregation if they asked, alright?"

"I just want to know if she's *all right!*" Josh pleaded. "Was she *hurt?* What did she *do?*"

Reluctantly, he recalled what John had told him. "Apparently, she tried to asphyxiate herself in their garage. She was only saved because Vicky heard the motor and went to go see what was going on. She was treated and then transferred to the psychiatric ward of the children's hospital in Akron. The family moved down there to be close to her while she was being helped."

Finally understanding why Jennifer and the family had just disappeared, Josh looked at the man kindly. "*Thank you.*"

"I'm sorry I had to be the one to tell you the news, Jocelyn." he said as he looked away. "I... uh... I *assume* that in your question, you and she were..." his voice trailed off, unable to actually say the words.

"...in *love?*" Josh finished for him. Nodding, he looked away as well. "Yes, very *much* so. She was *wonderful*. She cared more for *my* happiness than her *own*. And I... well... I would have done *anything* to make her happy!"

Turning back to Josh, he smiled weakly. "That can be a most wonderful thing, Jocelyn. Getting on with it though, I take it that you've met someone else? If it wouldn't be too personal a question, may I ask if it's a boy or girl?"

Swallowing hard, Josh looked back at him shyly. "Girl." he stated softly.

"Ah." Blowing out a breath, he puzzled over the question. "Well, to answer your question simply, from an *ethical* point of view, even though you and Jennifer... *loved*... one another, you were *far* too young to make any sort of commitment. That having been said, our Lord told us that a sin of the heart is just as bad as a sin of action. It *could* be said that starting a relationship with one person while in love with another is a form of spiritual adultery."

He continued in deep thought. "However, things are never that cut-and-dry. If that were the case, then every single *one* of us is equally guilty and equally redeemable through Christ. When I met Susan while I was studying for my theology degree, I was getting over a breakup with my previous girlfriend. She'd left me for another man. When Susan asked me out and I accepted, I was still in love with Barbara. Was that a *sin*? Even if it was, the Lord has forgiven it of me, so I don't *dwell* on it."

"But was that the *ethical* thing to do?" Josh asked. "I mean, taking sin and forgiveness out of it, was it *right*?"

"*Jocelyn*, if you're asking me if it's wrong to start dating this new girl while you still have feelings for Jennifer, I can't tell you that. To my mind, the whole *thing* is wrong. I'm *sorry*."

"What if I were a boy?" he asked. "Could you answer *then*?"

Sighing heavily, he thought about it. "Alright. *Theoretically*, if you *were* a boy, and you still loved Jennifer but she's moved away, and now there's a new girl, then the answer would be the same. It's wrong because your heart is elsewhere, so it's not fair to the new girl, Jennifer, *or* you. That having been said, no one could judge you for it without being a hypocrite, so you should just do what *you* think is right."

Josh nodded sadly. "I was *afraid* you might say something like that."

He looked at Josh sympathetically. "I'm sorry I can't give you the answer you *wanted*, Jocelyn." As Josh started to get up, Daniel stopped him. "One moment." Josh sat back down and the pastor took a breath. "I want you to know that, while I *personally* don't believe that you getting involved with other girls is *healthy* for you, I will *never* ask you to leave this church for that reason alone. You're *always* welcome here, Jocelyn. *Alright?*"

Seeing Josh nod in understanding, he continued. "The only thing I ask of you is to not openly discuss your... *private* life... with the other members of the congregation. Not because I disagree with it, but because I worry about you and don't want to see you get hurt. People, even the members of this church, can be cruel. They react badly sometimes to things they don't agree with, even if they might otherwise be reasonable and tolerant people."

"I'm also not putting special limits on *you*." he explained. "I would ask the same thing if you *were* a boy. Church is *not* the place to discuss one's love life. It's a *private* matter. I've told that to boys *and* girls that have attended this church over the years when I've overheard them talking about such things. This is a house of *worship*, not a *dating* club. Do you understand?"

Josh looked at the man he'd come to respect. "When I first met you Pastor, I *knew* you were a good person. Now I know *why*." Standing up and waiting for the man to do the same, Josh gave him a friendly hug. "*Thank* you for helping me, Pastor... and for letting me know what happened to Jennifer."

Hugging her in return, he smiled. "You're a good young woman, Jocelyn. I knew that the moment you told me the truth that you'd never been to church before. Come back *soon!*" Separating, he watched as Josh walked out of the office before turning back to his desk.

Josh sat on the bus and pondered the advice the pastor had given him. He liked Grace very much, but his heart was still aching for his lost first love. Knowing at last what he needed to do, he grimaced with determination and waited the return to his home.

Not wanting his parents to know what he was doing, he picked up his laptop and headed for a coffee shop that was near his school. He knew the shop had free Internet access, so once he bought a cup of tea, he sat down and logged into their network. Doing a few searches, he found what he was looking for and braced himself for the task ahead. Texting Grace, he hoped she would understand.

Hey. You free?

A moment later he saw the response.

4 u? always! sup?

Meet me at the coffee shop near school.

Almost immediately he saw the reply.

B their in 5!

Putting away his phone, he sipped his tea and waited. As promised, five minutes later Grace walked in and spotted him.

"*Hey, gorgeous!*" she smiled as she sat down at his table. "You look so *adorable* in that dress! So sweet and innocent! What's going on?"

Glancing up at her, Josh forged ahead. "I... I found out what happened to *Jennifer* today." he started glumly. Repeating the story the pastor had told him, he looked up at her and saw the expression of shock in her eyes.

"*Joss!* That's *awful!* Are you OK?"

Shrugging, he stared down at his cup. "*No*, but I understand how she felt. I've thought about doing something like that a *lot* over the years." Looking up at her, he could see she was worried. "Grace? Can I ask you a favor?"

"*Anything, Joss.*" she offered. "You name it and if I can do it, you can count on *me.*"

"It's a big one to ask of you. I want to use your phone for a few minutes." he explained. "I... I found out where the Healys moved and I wanna call 'em and let 'em know I found out what happened. I *have* to know if she's OK."

Hesitating only a moment, terrified that she might lose Josh to Jennifer, she swallowed her fear and handed him her cell phone. "You... you should go outside. The reception's better. I'll hold your table."

Getting up, Josh walked around, put a hand on Grace's shoulder as he paused next to her, looking at her compassionately and thankfully, then proceeded out the front door on a mission. Dialing the number as he stood near the doorway, Josh was visibly shaking, he was so terrified at what he might learn. After a few rings, his wait was finally over.

"*Hello?*" Vicky answered.

"*Vicky?* This is... um... this is *Josh*. Josh Ryan."

Standing in her living room, Vicky nearly dropped the phone. Too shocked to speak, she could only just make her mouth open and close silently.

"*Vicky?*" he probed. "*Vicky, please* answer me. I... I just today found out what happened to Jenn. Pastor Roberts told me when I went to church this morning. *Please!* I... I just need to know if she's *OK.*"

Finally recovering her composure, she cleared her throat before answering. "*Josh!* I... how did you get this number?"

"I looked online once I found what city you moved to." he explained. "The rest was easy, if you know where to look. How's *Jenn?*"

"Jenny's alright." she answered solemnly. "She... she was so devastated by losing you that... well... you *know* what she did. She told us that she wrote you about her plans, but you never did anything to *stop* her. Is that *true*?"

His turn to be caught speechless, he heard her say his name three times before he was able to answer. "I... I'm so *sorry*, Vicky! I couldn't read the notes she left for me! It just *hurt* too much. After the first one, I just took them and packed them away in a box. I never read *any* of them after that horrible day! You must *hate* me! I could have *stopped* her!"

"Of *course* I don't hate you, Josh!" she scolded him. "I understand why you couldn't read her letters. You must have been hurting just as badly, probably *worse*, after... after *that* day. I honestly blame *myself*. I was the one that insisted on talking to them. I thought they would be reasonable once they saw others saying the same thing you were. *I'm* the one who's sorry, Josh."

"*Mom*?" Jennifer said, causing the woman to jump and turn around suddenly in surprise.

"*Jenny*!" she said taking in a breath. "What *is* it, dear?"

"That's *Jocelyn* on the phone... *isn't* it?" she asked, her voice a lifeless husk.

"I didn't think you could hear me talking."

"I was curious who called." she stated hollowly. "Is she *OK*?"

"She... He seems *fine*, Jenny." her mother stammered. "He just wanted to know how *you* were."

"Can I talk to her?" both Jennifer and Josh asked at the same time.

Not knowing if it would be right or wrong to allow them to talk, Vicky was petrified. Jennifer had never fully recovered from the loss of him. Physically

she was fine, Vicky had caught her soon enough that there was no lasting damage, but emotionally Jennifer was still as devastated as Josh. She feared Jennifer re-connecting with him might lead to her attempting suicide again, but she also feared that if nothing changed for her daughter, that she might try again anyway through sheer sorrow and loss. Biting her lower lip, Vicky made a decision. "*Alright*. Just for a few minutes, though."

Taking the phone away from her mother, Jennifer spoke to Josh for the first time in almost three years. "*Jocelyn?*"

Hearing the name was bittersweet. Josh loved her so much though, he could never hate what she'd called him. "*Hi, Jenn. I... I just found out where you moved. I wanted to find out if you were OK... if you were... um...*"

Lighting up like a tree on Christmas morning just at the sound of his voice, Jennifer genuinely smiled as though she'd never before known happiness. "*I'm OK, Joss. How are you? You sound different. I guess I do, too.*"

"Yeah, but I think I'd know you *anywhere*." he sighed longingly. "I'm doing well enough." he lied. "*Jenn, can I ask you something?*"

"You just *did!*" she smirked.

Giggling a moment, Josh looked off toward the south in the general direction of Akron. "Good memory! *God*, I've missed you! I... I saw Pastor *Roberts* today. He told me what happened to you. Jenn, *please* don't ever do anything like that again! If you died, I'd die *too!* You have to *promise* me!"

Embarrassed, Jennifer looked down and frowned. "I'm *sorry*, Joss. It was *stupid*. I... I just hurt *so* much seeing you day after day, picking up my notes, and not even getting to see you read them. I watched you every day! When kids made fun of you, I told them off! I wanted *so* much to come up and talk to you, but..." She looked over at her mother and sighed. "...but I was afraid you'd just ignore me or I'd get my parents in trouble."

"I would never have ignored you, Jenn." Josh confessed. "I was afraid to talk to you. That if I did *you* might get in trouble. I was *so* sad when you left. I wasn't a very nice person for a while after that. Mom had me on blockers and they kinda messed with my head a little, but mostly it was because you were gone and... and I didn't know if you were OK."

"I missed you too." she answered simply.

"Jenn?" he took a breath. "I... I have to ask you a question, but I don't know *how*. I couldn't *stand* it if I hurt you again!"

"*You* never hurt me, Joss!" she stated in a firm voice. "It was all your *parents*! They were just *so* mean! Do they still have you on blockers?"

"I don't need them anymore." Josh informed her. "They... they put me on female hormones and had me castrated. I'm turning into a woman now."

"Oh *God*, Jocelyn!" she said in horror. "How can they *do* that!?"

Ashamed to say it, Josh felt she had to know the truth. "In the end, I just *let* them. Mom tricked me into getting castrated and after that, I just sort of gave up and let them do whatever they wanted. I'm *sorry*."

Now crying, Jennifer felt even more regret over her attempted suicide than before. "Oh, *Joss*! It's all *my* fault! If I hadn't done that, maybe you'd..."

"*Jenn*!" he shouted quietly. "Jenn, it's not *your* fault! It's *hers*." Pausing, he waited until Jennifer's sobs were under control. "I... I wanted to know if you were OK. Are you *happy*? Are... have... have you been *seeing* anyone?"

Guiltily, Jennifer nodded. "I'm OK. I... I *tried*, yeah. I feel bad about it now. Her name was Lindsey. I met her last September, but it didn't work out very well. I was still in love with you, so I messed it all up... but don't worry. I'll be OK. How about *you*?"

Closing his eyes, he told Jennifer the truth. "I'm OK, I guess... *considering*. I have a good friend. Her name's Grace. She knows all about me and likes me *anyway*. She *wants* to date me, and I *like* her, but... I... I *can't*. It... it wouldn't be fair... to *her*... or *you*."

Realizing that Josh was still in love with her, Jennifer's heart leapt before she realized there was no way they could see each other. Not only was there the distance, Melanie would be certain to still cause problems. Taking a breath, she let her heart do the talking and forged ahead. "It's *OK*, Joss. You... you should *do* it. I... I'd be *happy* for you, *really*." She meant it, even though the idea of him finally moving on stung.

Josh felt a tear roll down his cheek. "Same here, Jenn. I just want you to be happy. It's all I *ever* wanted." Taking a breath to calm himself, he knew there was not much more to say. "I... I guess I better go now, Jenn. Remember your *promise*, right? And just know... I... I *love* you. *Always*."

Crying as she responded in kind, Jennifer could barely answer. "Me *too*, Joss! *Never* forget that, *OK*? And I'll remember! *Together Forever!*"

"*Together Forever*." he echoed. "*Bye*, Jennifer."

"*Goodbye*... Jocelyn."

Both hanging up, they were immediately in tears from the heartbreak of their respective realities. While Josh went back into the coffee shop to be consoled by Grace, at the same time in Akron, Jennifer was bawling openly in her loving mother's arms.

Chapter 19 - Growing Up is Hard to Do

Trapped in a one-car garage filling with smoke, Josh found it strange that he could breath just fine. It was then that he saw both Jennifer and Grace were there and choking on the deadly fumes as he watched helplessly. Suddenly, he noticed he had a respirator in his hand and looked at the two girls in turn. He knew that he could only save one of them at this point, as they were both so close to death that by the time he'd saved one, the other would be gone. Frozen in indecision, he stood there and watched as both succumbed to the smoke and fell lifeless to the floor as he screamed.

"No!" Josh yelled as he sat up in bed; his plain white sheets soaked with sweat. Breathing hard while he determined it had all been a nightmare, he threw off his comforter and slid out of bed exhaustedly. Putting on his robe, he saw that it was after ten in the morning and Melanie would be long gone to work, having started working Saturdays for most of his freshman year. Slipping quietly into the bathroom and a shower, he scrubbed the terror of the night off his skin. Washing his now quite long light brown hair, he went through the rest of his morning beauty ritual out of habit.

After Grace had helped console Josh the Sunday earlier, she'd walked him home and stayed with him the rest of the day. Melanie had asked what was wrong, but both refused to answer, leaving her exasperated, frustrated, and angry. She'd made noises that Grace should leave, knowing that if the girl did she might worm the information out of Josh when he had no support, but Grace wouldn't be moved and Fred had eventually told her to leave them be. She'd stayed with Josh until he'd cried himself to sleep in bed.

While he showered, he considered that he could possibly look more 'manly' if he tried, but after so many years he just tried to blend in with the girls to not be picked on or noticed. Drying off and returning to his room, he thought about his dream. *I know what it meant*, he mused. *I don't have to be Freud to figure out that much!* He hated that he'd stood there and done nothing, frozen in terror and letting both die when he could have saved one. *But which one?*

Thinking about the dilemma, he realized that not picking was also a choice, the one he'd made and with catastrophic results. Understanding himself a little more than he had the night before, he opened his closet to get dressed. His body was growing steadily, just a hair under five-foot, but to his dismay his curves were growing ever more feminine and lovely. Looking over his choices, he opted for a pretty sundress that he knew looked good on him.

Getting dressed, he picked tan hose instead of tights to show off his legs and a pair of cute three-inch white strappy sandals with a heel to give him a bit of a height boost. Doing his hair and makeup, he went for a more grown-up and attractive style than normal, and picked out a pair of hoop earrings that Melanie had given him when she'd forced him to get his ears pierced.

Looking over the complete outfit, he knew instantly that he wasn't just pretty, but *hot*. Taking a breath, he walked over to his phone and called Grace.

"*Hey, Joss!*" she answered. "Feeling better? I've been worried about you all week! You haven't left the house the whole first week of summer vacation!"

"*Hi, Grace.*" he replied softly. "No, I'm *fine*. *Much* better, actually. Wanna do lunch? I sorta slept through breakfast and now I'm *starved!*"

The two giggled together before Grace answered. "*Sure! Where?*"

"How about the Sunset Lounge?" he asked coyly.

"*Really?*" she inquired. "That's a little *up-scale* for your usual 'let's eat like a cow' meals!" She mercilessly teased him about his inability to gain weight no matter how much he ate, but she knew he took it all in fun.

"Yeah. I just feel like eating somewhere... *nice*... today."

"I'll hafta *change* then." she warned him. "Right now I'm wearing a dirty T-shirt and baggy sweats! Mom says I look like a *bum!*"

"I can wait!" he offered. "How about I come down there and we'll walk over together?"

"*Beautiful!*" she said enthusiastically. "See you in a bit!"

"*Bye!*" they said together.

As he was headed out the door, Fred saw him from the kitchen while making his lunch. "*Woah!* Hold up there, princess!"

Stopping in his tracks, and closing his eyes at his father's favorite term of endearment, he turned and sighed. "Morning, Daddy." he said patiently.

Coming out into the living room, Fred looked him up and down twice. "OK, I'm officially a hypocrite."

"What *wrong?*"

Sighing, he looked in Josh's big brown eyes. "I *really* wanna say 'That outfit is inappropriate, young lady! Go up and change!' *so bad* right now!"

Josh felt the outfit was no more inappropriate than many he'd worn before. The skirt was knee-length and the rest of the dress didn't show off too much skin. *OK, so the back is open all the way down to just above my butt...* He actually found himself hopeful that Fred might care enough to set at least *one* boundary, even if he thought it overprotective, making Josh smile at the idea before his too-easy-going father killed the moment.

"But I know better." he told himself. "You going over to see Grace?"

Let down, Josh nodded glumly. "*Yeah.* We're gonna have lunch." Seeing his father pull out his wallet, Josh objected. "*No, Daddy!* You give me enough allowance to fund a Ph.D. at Harvard! *Speaking* of which, when I'm sixteen, I wanna get a job and earn my *own* money. Can you talk to Melanie?"

Still not comfortable with Josh calling her 'Melanie' while he still called him 'Daddy', even after almost three years, Fred shook his head and absently put away his wallet, the money already forgotten. "Look, we'll talk about it when your mom gets home, *alright?* Right now just give your old man a kiss and be careful!"

Kissing him on his cheek, Josh gave him a quick hug and turned toward the door. "Bye Daddy. See you at dinner."

Fred nearly stopped him before leaving, wanting to tell him to go change, but then chided himself for desiring to control his 'daughter' and turned back toward the kitchen.

Making his way to Grace's house, Josh noticed the looks from his neighbors, but kept walking. Reaching her home, he smiled at the sight. It was a lovely single-story building, forest green trimmed in light gray with a well-kept lawn and an apple tree in the middle of the front yard. He saw Judy's small blue sedan in the driveway, but wasn't surprised since he knew her job as a paralegal gave the woman weekends off.

Going right in as he'd been told many times not to knock, he slowed a moment to let his eyes adjust to the darker interior. Coming up the entry hall, he turned left and entered the modest living room. Sparsely decorated, only one photo hung in the room over the fireplace. Seeing a man dressed in the uniform of a United States Marine and standing next to an American flag, he felt a pang of sorrow that he'd never gotten to know Grace's father. Josh had the feeling that he really would have liked him. She often talked happily about her dad, telling stories of where he'd been stationed and what he'd done, but Josh could always see the hurt just beneath her surface.

"*Judy?*" he called out toward the kitchen.

"*Hi, Jocelyn!*" she called back. "Grace is in the shower! Come on in and grab a chair!"

Making his way around the corner into the dining room, he saw the kitchen just beyond it with a breakfast bar closing off most of the border between the two rooms. Spotting the widowed woman at the sink, he smiled as he made his way over to her. "*Hi, Judy! Enjoying your weekend?*"

Laughing, she shook her head. "*Lovely! I just adore doing dishes!*" Turning off the water and grabbing a dishtowel to dry her hands, she at last turned to see Josh and what he was wearing. "Did you wait until your father wasn't looking and *sneak* out wearing that?" she asked jokingly.

He stopped his approach and felt a little embarrassed for his wardrobe choice. Lowering his head, he shook it and shrugged. "*No. He saw me. I thought he might say something, but he just gave me a kiss and told me to be careful. I think it looks fine!*"

Sighing and shaking her head as she mentally criticized Josh's father, she clucked her tongue and gestured toward one of the stools at the breakfast bar. "Well, if you were *my* daughter, I'd have suggested something a little less... *grown up*. Scott would have *insisted* it was too 'adult' for a fifteen-year-old!" Thinking about Scott a moment, she couldn't determine if he'd have let Josh become a girl if he'd been their son, but she saw Josh as so much a natural girl, she had difficulty finding a rational argument to deny it.

Shrugging, Josh repressed his smile. *I must be pretty hot if everyone's taking so much notice!* Scrutinizing Grace's mother, he could see that even only a few years ago she'd been quite a looker. Now, worn down by loss, work, and raising a daughter alone, her lovely auburn hair was beginning to turn gray, her once lithe five-nine figure had gone slightly pear-shaped, and her bright blue eyes were now a dull color from worry and exhaustion. "It's just that today I was feeling a little... *different*." he stated. "*Older, I guess.*"

While the two chatted, Grace came out of the bathroom and heard the two talking. Sneaking up to the dining room entryway, a robe wrapped around her and her hair in a white towel, she spied Josh and quietly gasped at his

outfit. Retreating to her room, she decided that the jeans and top she'd gotten out were not going to cut it.

"So where are you two off to, then?" Judy asked curiously.

"The Sunset Lounge." Josh said with a smile. "I was just feeling a little..."

"...older?" Judy interrupted him with a sly grin. "*Yes, you said that.*" she stated cautiously as she sat down next to him. "*Jocelyn*, I'm glad for a chance to talk to you. Grace is *very* fond of you. *Very*. I'm glad she's found someone special like you out here. I grew up near Cleveland, but she's spent her whole life in California, so I was worried that she'd be too different to make good friends here." Pausing a moment, she collected her thoughts.

"When Scott died, she was thirteen and absolutely *worshipped* him. Still, to this day, I've never seen her cry over his loss." Facing Josh, Judy's voice lowered. "When she became your friend, she put all her eggs in one basket, so to speak. She hasn't made *any* other friends. I don't think she could *take* it if you two were to get involved and then lose you. I just don't want to see her get hurt. Or *you!*" she added.

Josh gulped at the heaviness of the conversation. "Mrs. Wright, I know we're still only fifteen. I *like* Grace. *Very* much. I was going to ask her at lunch if she'd be my girlfriend. If you tell me we can't date, I'll respect your decision. I'll *have* to, but that won't stop how we *feel* about each other. I'd *never* hurt her or abandon her. *Believe* me, I know what that's like. I could *never* do that to someone I care about."

Turning sorrowful, Josh looked out the kitchen window. "I used to have two of the best friends in the *world*, Tracy and Dave. They were twins. Then, when I had some problems, they gave up on me. I still see 'em around school and the neighborhood, but they *ignore* me. Every time I see them it just... just *hurts*." Looking Judy in the eyes, Josh poured all his feelings into one statement. "I would *never* do that to *anyone*. I'd rather *die*."

Seeing the pain in his eyes, Judy nodded. "*Alright. I believe you. Just...*" She had to look away, the terrible agony in Josh's eyes too much to bear. "Just... go *slow*, OK? You have your whole *lives* ahead of you. Don't do anything you might... *regret...* later."

Smiling, Josh waited until she looked back at him. "Judy? I'm like... a *snail!*" Both laughed lightly at that as Judy got up to go to the fridge.

"Can I make you a snack while you wait?" she asked.

"No thanks." he said heavily. "I was thinking that maybe I should go home and change into something a little less..."

"...obvious?" Judy smirked. Shaking her head and making herself lunch, she could only remind herself that when she was fifteen, she was no different.

"Don't you even *think* about it!" Grace said from behind him.

Turning on the stool, he nearly fell off it when Grace spun in place to show off her outfit. She was wearing a dress similar to his with a complimentary print, but with spaghetti straps instead of a halter and a higher back. His heart hammering in his chest, he looked her over and felt a tingling in his belly. Her makeup made her look to be in her late teens or early twenties and the hem of her skirt fell several inches above her knees, showing off her very attractive legs. The color was a slightly darker shade and wasn't cut quite as low in the front as his own, but emphasized her figure nicely.

"*Wow.*" Josh exclaimed with a low breath. "You look..." Words failed him as she walked closer.

"*Thanks!* You ready?" she asked with a slight blush.

Glancing from her daughter to Josh and back, Judy saw the obvious attraction between them and sighed. "*Please* be careful, Grace!" she begged.

"We will, Mom!" Grace said with a smile and taking Josh's hand. "Bye!"

The two sat in the restaurant nibbling their lunches, gazing at each other dreamily. Grace scanned him up and down, a sly smile creeping across her lips. Dressed as he was, Josh seemed delectable.

"Grace?" he stated shyly as he finished his soup. Snapping her out of the dream-state she was in, undressing him with her eyes, he giggled as she blushed.

"Sorry!" Grace turned away. "I shouldn't *stare* like that!"

"Like *what*?" he asked throatily. "Like a hungry *wolf*?" Both giggling, it was Josh's turn to blush. "Grace? I... um... I *like* you *very* much... and um... I was wondering... well, if... um..."

Her heart raced as Grace heard the words. Seeing that he was having a hard time saying what he wanted to, the fear almost palpable, she held up a hand to stop him. "*Joss*? I like you *too*! A *whole* lot! Would you go out with me? We could go to a movie! I know they don't make musicals anymore, but it still might be fun! We could see one *together*... as like... a *couple*."

Smiling that she'd taken the pressure off, he nodded. "Yes! I... I'd *love* to!"

Slowly, Josh moved his hand closer to the girl sitting across from him at the tiny table. When she did likewise, their fingertips met in the middle and linked together.

Walking out of his house that Friday evening just before Melanie was due to get home, Josh was glad he'd managed to avoid her. Her smug 'I told you so' attitude about his relationship with Grace was enough to make him want to call the whole thing off. He couldn't hurt Grace that way just to get back at his mother, though. Making his way down the walkway, the hem of his skirt drifting against his calves in the light breeze of the late afternoon, he made

his way to her place. Going up to her door, he stopped and knocked for the first time in months.

Grace opened the door wearing a lovely floral summer outfit in a similar style to the one Josh wore. "*Hi!*" she said shyly. "Come on in."

Entering, Josh felt the atmosphere was different from the hundreds of other times he'd walked in the home. Catching the light scent of Grace's perfume, his head swam with lovely thoughts. "*Thanks, Grace! You look beautiful!*" Admiring her short-cropped hairstyle, he couldn't take his eyes off of her.

"You look *gorgeous*, Joss!" Grace returned the compliment. "I *love* the way your hair is done! It's *so* sexy!" Taking Josh's hand, she led him to the living room. "We're just waiting on Mom. She should be ready any minute." Sitting on the old leather couch, she patted the cushion next to her. "Sit with me while we wait?"

Smoothing the skirt under him, Josh lighted next to her and noticed that she immediately put her hand in his. Nervously, he glanced over at her. "So... after the movie, what did you want to do?" he asked with a slight waver in his irritatingly feminine voice.

"Things we're too young to do!" she teased. "But *seriously*, anything you like! The movie was *my* choice, so whatever *you* like after works!"

He was about to suggest something silly when Judy came out appearing nicer than Josh had ever seen her. Usually in jeans and a top, she'd instead worn a green shirtwaist dress that was open enough to see only a hint of cleavage. As the two stood, Judy smiled at them.

"Aren't you two *lovely!*" she complimented them. "Are you ready?"

"We've been ready for *ages*, Mom!" Grace moaned. "You look OK, though."

"I think you look *beautiful*, Judy!" Josh emphasized. "Green *really* works for you! It really sets off your hair!"

"*Thank* you, dear!" the older woman smiled. "Well, let's go then!" As the three headed out the door to her car, she continued talking. "I think the last time I saw a movie in the theater was *The Return of the King* with you and your father, Grace! Remember that?"

Nodding a little sadly as she climbed in the back seat, the girl remembered the last time she'd seen her father. "Yeah, he *loved* those movies! He was home for two whole weeks before he got shipped out again that last time."

Slipping in beside her, Josh took her hand after buckling in. The rest of the drive had the two in silence as Judy nattered on about movies, memories, and what they might do after the film.

In the end, the two decided to go out to a nice restaurant afterward, Judy offering to pay for the chance to show off 'her girls', as she put it. Shortly after arriving, while they sat at their table talking and waiting for their order to be taken, Judy felt a tap on her shoulder.

Turning around, she saw a man in his late thirties grinning at her. "May I *help* you?" she asked nervously.

"You don't recognize me, *do* you?" he asked with a light chuckle in his voice.

Straining her mind, she tried to see the man's face as though it were younger, but still couldn't place him. "I'm really very sorry. Are you sure you have the right person? Do I *know* you?"

Shaking his head while Josh and Grace looked on silently, his laugh was almost infectious as he tried to calm himself and answer her. "We only dated for most of *High School*, Judy Dillard!"

A flood of memories came rushing back to Judy's mind. "Oh my *Lord!* Greg Long?" Getting up, she hugged him briefly and then gestured to the empty fourth chair. "Won't you *join* us?"

Glancing at the two seated with her, he looked back at her. "I wouldn't want to *intrude*, Judy... and I'd guess it's not *Dillard* anymore." Looking back at the two teens, he added, "You have two *very* lovely daughters and I wouldn't want there to be any misunderstanding." He peeked at her left hand and noted the engagement ring and wedding band she still wore on her ring finger.

"Oh, *that!*" Judy at last understood his hesitancy as she sat back down. "I'm *widowed*, Greg. My Scott died over two years ago in Afghanistan."

His smile melting, he suddenly seemed embarrassed as he took a seat. "I'm *very sorry*, Judy. I didn't know." Turning his gaze toward Grace and Josh, he nodded respectfully at them. "To you two as well. I'm sorry for your loss."

"Greg, this is my daughter, Grace... and her very close friend, *Jocelyn*." Judy explained.

Looking at the two, he quickly realized that Josh looked nothing like Grace or Judy. "*Oh!* Well... to you then, Grace. You're *both* very lovely ladies, though!" Turning back to Judy, his face lit back up. "Last I heard, you went off to UCLA to study law."

"That's where I met Scott, my husband." Judy nodded. "We got married after I graduated. Grace and I only just moved here last year after..."

"Well, it's good to see you, Judy... though I wish it could be under happier circumstances." Getting up, he nodded across the table. "*Grace?* I just want you to know that I'm *very* grateful for your father's service and sacrifice... and *yours*. Everyone here owes him a debt of gratitude. On behalf of us all, *thank you*."

When Greg first interrupted her time with Josh, Grace was irritated. After his heartfelt condolences though, all she could feel was guilty that she'd instantly hated him for it. "*Thank* you, Mr. Long." she blushed sadly.

Cupping Judy's hand in both of his, he smiled down at her. "We'll have to get together sometime, Judy!" Releasing her, he fished a business card out of his inside jacket pocket. "Call me, if you *like*!"

Suddenly feeling very flushed and self-conscious, Judy realized he was even more handsome than she recalled. She also noted he obviously remembered her fondly, and that he wasn't wearing a wedding ring; his finger showing no signs that he ever had. Taking the card, she cleared her throat. "I may *do* that, Greg! It was nice seeing you again!"

"*Likewise*, Judy!" he beamed. "*Ladies*?" he said bowing ever so slightly to Grace and Josh as he departed.

While he walked away, Judy couldn't help but watch him go, joining a group of men at another table. Turning back to the two fifteen-year-olds, she picked up her glass of water and sipped it anxiously as they gawked at her. "*What*?" she asked, putting the glass back down.

Grace couldn't stand it. "Well? *Talk*! You used to *date* that guy?"

Nodding, Judy answered wistfully. "Up until just after the Senior Prom, yes. He was a *wonderful* young man... polite and charming. I guess he still *is*!"

Josh was equally curious. "What ever *happened* with you two?" he asked conspiratorially. "I mean... how did you two break up?"

Chuckling lightly, she sighed. "Stupid teenage angst!" she answered vaguely. "I thought he was cheating on me with Linda Baker, an old friend of mine, but it turned out that she just spread that rumor so we *would* break up and she *could* date him! Before we could reconcile though, he got his scholarship to

University of Toledo and I had my acceptance to go to UCLA... so..." She shrugged helplessly.

Awkward silence hung over the table as they waited for their food after ordering, all previous conversation forgotten. Finally, Grace broke the lull. "Looks like he's still got the *hots* for ya', Mom!"

Nearly choking on her water, Judy coughed and drew a lot of attention from the other diners, including Greg, before they all turned back to their meals. "Grace Elaine *Wright!*" she shouted quietly, making the two teens giggle at her flustered response. Before she could chastise her daughter further, the waiter brought out their appetizers.

While they ate, Grace slipped her hand under the table and took Josh's hand discreetly. Smiling at one another, they continued their meal.

"So *Jocelyn.*" Judy asked, "What are your plans for the summer?"

Shrugging, he finished his bite of linguini. "Not *much*, Judy. Just church on Sunday, really."

Stopping eating, she looked at him surprisedly. "I didn't know your parents went to *church!*"

Swallowing, he shook his head. "*They* don't... and they don't know I go, either. If they knew, they'd forbid it. They're *very* anti-Christian." Noting Judy's concern, he put down his fork. "*Please* don't tell them, Judy! I *like* going to church and I don't want them to *stop* me from going!"

"I don't know about this, dear." the woman stated her concerns. "You're their *daughter* and they *should* know where you are and what you're doing."

Grace decided to add her two cents. "Mom? It wouldn't be *fair* to tell them just to stop Joss from going! Because that's all it would do!"

"That's not *our* decision, Grace." she pointed out. "Parents have a right to have a say over anything that happens to their children."

"What if they'd decided that Jocelyn shouldn't have transitioned?" Grace probed, looking for an opportunity to work in Josh's 'special circumstances' without risking his secret.

"Then that would be their decision and she'd have had to put up with it until she turned eighteen." Judy declared easily. "That's all there is *to* it!"

"What if they'd *forced* Jocelyn to transition, even if she didn't *want* to?" her daughter pressed.

Pausing briefly, Judy furrowed her brow as she tried to imagine the situation. Shaking her head in disbelief, she sighed. "They would never *do* that. *No* parent would make their child be a girl when they really weren't!"

"But what if they *did*, huh?" she countered. "Would *that* still make them right?"

"If *that* were the case," Judy admitted, "then no, that would be wrong. It would also be *illegal* and classed as *child* abuse."

"What if they had a letter from a psychiatrist." Josh added meekly. "A letter that was written as a favor to my mother. Wouldn't that *make* it legal?"

Looking at him askance, Judy nodded after thinking a moment. "OK, but it would open up the psychiatrist to a malpractice suit, so..."

"It's *true*." Josh interrupted her sadly. "They *did* it."

"Did *what*?" Judy asked in confusion. "*Who* did?"

"My parents. They did it. They *made* me become a girl."

"I don't understand." Judy stated. "What do you mean, *made* you?"

"Melanie got a coworker of hers to write a letter saying I'm dysphoric after a five minute talk, then used it to get me on hormone blockers, castrated, and put on HRT." Josh explained fully. "I never wanted *any* of it, but they wouldn't *listen* to me. They just kept telling me it was for my own good."

Seeing the genuine sadness in his eyes, Judy just looked at him in utter disbelief. Finally, she scooted a little closer to him. "*Jocelyn*, don't even *joke* about things like that! It could get people in serious trouble!"

"I.. I'm not *joking*, Mrs. Wright." he answered sadly. "They did exactly what I just said. I *never* wanted to be a girl. They *made* me be one. After a year or so, I just gave up fighting them and *let* them do it to me. Fighting them was pointless *anyway*. They *always* get their way eventually."

Glancing over at Grace, Judy saw her daughter nod seriously. Slowly, she turned to face Josh once more.

Humiliation making him unable to face her stunned gaze, he closed his eyes and stated his truth. "They turned me into a girl and there's nothing you, me, or anyone else can *do* about it."

Chapter 20 - Another Birthday

Judy spent the next month looking into any legal options for Josh. In the end all that came of it was that he could file a malpractice lawsuit against Dr. Williams, but not until after he turned eighteen. Until then only his parents could file one on his behalf.

As for action against his parents, while she made sure to couch her questions in hypotheticals to protect Josh's anonymity, everyone she'd spoken to gave her the same answer; in Ohio, a parent's authority over their children was almost absolute unless abuse could be proven. So long as Melanie had a letter certifying that Josh was transgendered, everything she'd done was completely legal and in 'her' best interests.

By the time school resumed in September for their sophomore year, Josh was almost indistinguishable from the girls in his classes, only noteworthy for his smaller size and above average looks. He was also seeing Grace daily.

Walking to their lockers on the Monday four days before Halloween, the girl seemed nervous. Josh didn't say anything, figuring she would tell him when she was ready, and proceeded to put in his combination.

"*Joss?* Next Sunday is my birthday." she stated.

"I know!" he answered, putting away half his books. "I already have your present if you were thinking of dropping any hints!"

"No... nothing like *that*." Grace elaborated. "My Grandmother, my *dad's* mom, is coming out to see me."

Not having ever met any of his own grandparents, both Fred and Melanie's parents having all died without ever meeting them, Josh shrugged. "Sounds nice! What's she like?"

"Like about a *hundred!*" Grace groaned. Turning away embarrassedly, she continued. "Um... *Joss*, she... she doesn't..." Gathering her nerve, she said it all at once. "She doesn't know I'm Bi, OK? So she doesn't know anything about you and me."

Stopping as he was about to close his locker, he looked at her. "You mean, she doesn't know you're my girlfriend?"

Looking away, she mumbled something.

"Sorry, *what?*" he asked.

"She doesn't even know you *exist*." Grace said again. Sighing once more, she seemed to drag her feet as she headed towards her locker. "Grandma Doris is like, old-fashioned? I mean... like, *really* old-fashioned! She seems to think all sixteen-year-old girls should already either be *betrothed* or *married*! She's *constantly* on me to write and tell her about my 'suitors'! I can't exactly tell her my 'paramour' is a fifteen-year-old *girl*... sorta... no offense, and I can't really talk about *you* without getting all *mushy*, so..."

Giggling slightly, Josh smiled at Grace's troubles. "Aw! I'm *sorry*, Grace!" he apologized as she looked upset. "How often do you have to email her?"

"No, I mean *write*, as in on a piece of *paper* with a *pen*!" she complained. "She doesn't even *have* email! I tried typing her a letter once and printing it out. She said it was cold and impersonal! I even signed it by *hand*!"

Too much to take, Josh caught a case of the giggles. "*Oh!* I'm *sorry*, Grace! I... I can't *help* it! It's just too *funny* is all!" he continued to laugh while she fumed.

"Yeah, well you won't find *this* funny. She's bringing me out a *date* for my birthday!" Grace grouched.

His laughter coming to an abrupt end, Josh looked at her. "You... you can't be *serious*?" he hoped.

"Oh... I'm afraid *so*, Joss." she seethed as she spun the dial on her locker like a top. "His name's Francis *Green*, he's *twenty*, he goes to *Harvard*, and drives a *Mercedes*. And he's taking me to dinner, dancing, and a *movie*!"

His heart breaking as he listened, believing that she was mad because he was laughing, Josh was only moments from running off to the nearest restroom to cry. "You... you told her you'd *go* with him?" When Grace didn't answer, he nearly broke down. "Are you *dumping* me, Grace?"

Slamming her palm against her locker as she messed up the combination again, she glared at Josh. "*No*! How can you even *ask* me that!" Turning away from him, she tried again to open it.

Gulping in fear, Josh said nothing until she'd opened the lock. "I... I guess because you told her you'd go with him. You're going on a *date*, with another boy... a *man*. What am I *supposed* to think, Grace?" When she didn't answer, Josh continued. "Look, I *know* you like manly-looking guys as well as girls! I've seen you ogling Jeff Spencer at football games when you're in color guard! I don't *care*! But... a *date*? With a grown *man*? A man in *college*?"

Waiting, when Grace didn't say anything, the microscopic vestiges of his male ego were crushed. "I... I guess I'll just never be good enough for you. I hope you have a good birthday without me. I guess I'll see you around." Turning to go, Grace caught his arm.

"*Joss*!"

When Grace spun him around to face her, she saw he was silently crying.

"*Damn* it, Joss!" she nearly sobbed. "Of *course* I want you to be there! It's my sweet sixteen! I don't *want* to go, she's *making* me go!"

Furrowing his brow, he yanked his arm from her hand and wiped tears off his cheek. "*Making* you go? How can she *force* you to go on a date with a grown man? *Twenty*, Grace? That's *creepy*! Thinking about some grown man putting his *hands* on you..."

Looking up and away at his graphic depiction, she then returned her gaze to his face and yelled in a whisper, "How can she *make* me, Joss? The same way Melanie *made* you get your *ears* pierced! You can't tell her *no*!"

Infuriated that she would try to compare his living hell to her situation, Josh narrowed his eyes at her and pursed his lips. "Last *I* checked, the only one you *have* to obey is *Judy*!" he shot back quietly. "*I have* no choice! If I don't do what Melanie says, they can lock me up! In a *boys'* juvenile detention! Can you just see what would happen to me *there*? Nothing *bad* will happen to you if you disobey your grandmother... *will* it, Grace? You're just too scared to tell your grandma no! Either that or you actually *want* to date Sir Slab of *Beefcake*! Fancy *car*! *Dinner* and *dancing*! So, which *is* it?"

Hearing the hurt, anger, and betrayal in Joss's voice and seeing the tears dripping from his eyes, Grace knew she should say something, but she could only hang her head in shame at being too cowardly to tell her grandmother the truth. Unfortunately, it was the worst thing she could do.

"*I see.*" he said sadly, taking her silence the worst way possible. "You *do* want to go. Well, I hope he's *worth* it, Grace. *Goodbye.*" At that, he turned and stormed off to his first class, leaving her standing there alone.

When Grace looked for Josh in their usual meeting place, the same spot on the grass behind the benches they sat in on the first day they met, he wasn't there. She didn't see him again the rest of the day either, which was unusual as there were several times during the day that they should cross paths.

At first she was angry with him for assuming the worst of her, but the more she thought about how there could be no real negative repercussions if she

just told her grandmother the truth, that she was Josh's girlfriend, the worse she felt. By the time she returned home, Grace was certain that she'd ruined their relationship with her cowardice.

Sunday the second of November came and Grace sat in her living room bored and depressed. While her grandmother was visiting with Judy in the kitchen, Frank, her unwanted guest, sat too close to her with his arm on the back of the couch behind her head. Regaling her with dull stories about college and fraternity life, he obviously thought he was utterly fascinating to a sixteen-year-old girl. Feeling dirty and used, she wished she could be anywhere else but there right then, preferably in Josh's arms.

"So *anyway*," he blathered on, "that was the *third* time I caught him in a logical fallacy, which all but ended the debate! We *won*, of course!" Turning to Grace, Frank lowered his arm so that he could touch her bare neck and shoulders. "So... *Grace*? Now that you're sixteen, you're free to do a lot of things you *couldn't* do before!" he oozed.

Standing up to avoid his touch, she shuddered with revulsion. "Can I get you anything, Frank? Coffee? Soda? *Neutered*?" she mumbled under her breath.

"Nothing like *that*, Grace." he said, standing up next to her. "Maybe *later*? Say *after* dinner? *Skip* the movie? Find a nice motel somewhere? You're a really lucky girl! I know how to treat a woman!"

As he reached for her, Grace headed for the kitchen. "So, Grandma Doris! How've you been?"

Seeing her granddaughter running away from the date she'd spent a lot of time and trouble setting up, she stood and narrowed her eyes at Grace. "You seem to have forgotten your *manners*, dear! You have a *guest* to see to!"

"But Grandma Doris, it's my *birthday*, and I haven't seen you in two years! I *miss* you!" She hoped the ploy would sidetrack things for a while at least.

Falling for the act, Doris Wright smiled at her. "Of *course*, child! I should have thought about that! *Francis!* Won't you join us in the dining room?" Moving Grace to a chair, she took the one to the girl's right while Frank entered and took the one to her left, sliding the chair over so he could drape his right arm over the back of hers.

"Mother Wright?" Judy interceded. "Perhaps Frank should sit a respectable distance from Grace."

"*Nonsense*, Judy!" she batted away the suggestion. "Let the young lady *be!* She's sixteen now and not some *child!* I'm sure she's *quite* content with a big, strong arm around her!"

Judy put her foot down. "Whether she is or not, Mother Wright, this is *my* house and Scott wouldn't have tolerated it, so neither will I. *Frank?*"

Seeing the woman was not going to give in, Frank cleared his throat and scooted his chair back where it came from. "Yes, Ma'am."

"Oh, *Judy!*" Doris admonished. "You're ruining the girl's day! Sixteen is supposed to be the opening of new frontiers! *Magical! Mysterious!* The doorway to *womanhood!*"

"In *this* house, Grace's doorway to womanhood is *closed!*" she insisted as she sat across from her mother-in-law.

The mood turning chilly while everyone went silent, Grace tried to fix it. "Could I open my presents now, Mom?"

Sighing before looking at her daughter, Judy smiled kindly. "Of *course*, sweetheart! *Frank?* Lend me a hand?"

As the two left the room, Grace looked over at her grandmother. "So... Frank seems... *mature.*"

"He *is*, child." she replied frankly. "Mature, virile, wealthy, well-connected, with good breeding and a good future. You would do well to take advantage of his interest in you! You don't know how hard it was to *get* that interest. My *son*, your *father*, God rest his soul, being a military man who didn't even have the wherewithal to get a commission, doesn't exactly inspire the *crème de la crème* of society to come seeking your hand."

Standing, Doris paced around the table. "I'll not see my only granddaughter marry some backwoods farmer from *Ohio*! So you listen to me! You stick to Francis tonight like glue! *Make* him want you! Make him *beg* to have you! Only give in when he offers you his *name*!" Coming around the table, she moved up behind Grace and laid her hands on the girl's shoulders, pushing down the corners of her sleeves to expose more shoulder. "I think you know what to do!"

In shock that her grandmother was suggesting she give herself to a man she barely knew in promise of him marrying her, she was too terrified to even speak. Luckily, at that moment Judy and Frank brought in her gifts. While she unwrapped them, her mind was racing to find a way out of all this.

When at last she thought she'd opened all her presents, she went to get up before seeing a small package that had been hidden under some discarded wrapping paper. "What's *this*?" she asked, picking it up.

Looking at it a moment, Judy had to think before she remembered. "*Oh!* That was the gift *Jocelyn* dropped off for you on Friday. I forgot all about it! I'm *sorry* she missed today, Grace! I know you wanted her to be here!"

"Who is this *Jocelyn*?" Doris asked as though the name were dirty. "Some schoolgirl friend?"

"She's my *best* friend, Grandma Doris." Grace said as she examined the package wistfully. "The best friend I've ever *had*!" Looking at the perfectly wrapped box, tears formed in the corners of her eyes as she realized Josh

had dropped it off after their fight; that he'd still wanted her to have it, even after she'd let him down so badly.

"Well, go *on* child!" Doris insisted impatiently. "Open it and get it *over* with so we can get *on* with the evening!"

Peeling the paper back slowly and carefully, she at last revealed a simple white box with a lid. Lifting it off and pushing aside the tissue paper, her breath caught and the threatening tears flowed like water as Grace's face furrowed into sobs of anguish.

"Whatever is the *matter*, child!" Doris bristled. "What's going on?"

Making her way around the table, Judy put her arm around Grace, helping her to sit as the girl cradled the box in her hands as she cried openly. "*Grace*, sweetie? What's *wrong*? What did she *get* you?" Looking down at the gift, Judy nearly started crying herself. "Oh, *Grace*!"

Pulling herself together, the girl choked back her tears and finally showed her grandmother the contents of the box. "It's *Daddy*!" she choked out.

Snatching the gift, she examined it like a pawnbroker appraising a stolen watch. It was a wood carving, obviously done with a dremel using a piece of oak that had been stained and polished until it shone. Carved into it was the face of her son with a grim and determined expression. Under it, carved in lovely calligraphy, were three simple words.

"No Greater Love..." Doris said slowly as she read them.

Grace threw her arms around her mother and bawled heavily, not caring if she embarrassed her grandmother or Frank. "Oh, *Mom*!" she cried.

Standing up, Doris was furious. "Grace! Stop that at *once*! You're *sixteen*, not *six*! It's a simple *wood carving* not worth the stain used to *make* it!"

Hearing the harsh words, Grace slowly let go of Judy as the tears stopped.

"That's *better!*" Doris said with a smile. "Now..."

"*Shut! Up!*" Grace shouted slowly as she stepped away from Judy and in front of Doris. "Just *shut* your stupid *mouth!*"

"*Grace!*" Judy said in surprise.

"I've put up with just about *enough* of this, Mother!" the girl yelled. "I put up with her setting me up on a date I don't *want...* I put up with *denying* myself for *her* sake... I put up with her causing me to not have *Joss* here today... I even put up with her telling me I should act like a *bimbo* tonight for *Frank* here so he might be *horny* enough to marry me! But when she belittles such a *beautiful* gift from the girl I *love*, that's *too much!*"

Stepping in front of Doris, standing nearly eye-to-eye with the older woman, Grace laid it all out. "Don't you *ever* say *anything* bad about *anything* my Jocelyn does! Do you *hear* me you nasty old *bat?*"

Sputtering like an engine running out of gas, her eyes widened at what Grace was saying. "*Your* Jocelyn? The girl you *love*? Have you gone *mad*, girl? No granddaughter of *mine...*"

"Ya' wanna *bet?*" Grace interrupted her. "Get a *clue*, Doris. I'm *Bi!* *Suck* it! I like *girls!* In fact, I'm in *love* with one! Jocelyn is *ten* times the woman you'll *ever* be without even *trying!*" Turning to Frank, who still sat in his chair speechless, it was his turn for her wrath. "And ten times the *man* you'll *ever* be! At least *he* doesn't try to sexually assault sixteen-year-old *girls* in their own *home!* Try to touch me *again* and you'll pull back a bloody *stump!* Ya' got that, *Romeo?*"

Grace was suddenly overcome with a need to get away. Picking up the carving, she looked at the three she'd intimidated into silence. "Now if you'll

excuse me, I have a *girl* to go thank for the best gift I've ever *gotten*... *him!* If he'll still *have* me!" At that she ran out of the house as fast as the long skirt of her dress and her high heels would allow.

Looking at her mother-in-law in stunned silence while Grace went on her rampage and then out the door, Judy finally asked, "You told her to let this man take *advantage* of her?" When she saw Doris was not going to deny the claim but try to justify it, she didn't even let her finish. "Get *out*, Doris. Get out and *never* come back. Don't *write*, don't *call*, don't *bother!* You will have *nothing* to do with Scott's daughter! Don't even *speak* to me! *Get! Out!*"

Her face contorted into fear and then fury, Doris narrowed her eyes and walked out the door without a word.

Turning at last to Frank, she leaned over the back of his chair and stated calmly, "I have my husband's Beretta M-nine on my nightstand, *Frank*. You have until I *reach* it to get off my property or I'm going to blow a hole in you so big you could row a *boat* through it!" That said, she started down the hallway at a brisk pace.

Frank came flying out of the house and passed Doris at a run as though the devil himself were on his heels before Judy even reached her bedroom door.

Josh sat in his room, still dressed from church. He told his parents that he'd gone out for breakfast, which he had after the services, and then returned without a word. In fact, he hadn't spoken to them all week save that which was absolutely necessary and unavoidable. While he lay on his bed, thoughts of ending his miserable existence floating though his mind, they were suddenly dismissed when he heard a commotion downstairs.

Grace ran in her heels all the way to Josh's home, not even caring that she looked ridiculous running through her neighborhood in an evening gown. When she at last reached his house, she burst in through the front door and yelled, "*Joss!*"

Fred and Melanie came running into the living room while Grace continued to shout for him. "What's going on?" Melanie shouted at her. "*Grace! Stop that yelling!*"

Fred tried to calm both women down. "Let's just settle *down*, now!" he shouted. "*Grace? Please stop shouting! Mel? You too!*"

"*Joss!*" the girl shouted again as she searched the room. Seeing he wasn't downstairs, she shouted towards the upstairs landing. "*Joss!*"

Getting up, Josh made his way to the bedroom door and out to the stairs. When he saw Grace being surrounded by his parents shouting at her, their eyes met in a moment.

"*Joss!*" Grace said in relief as she saw him on the upper landing, pushed between the two adults, and ran up the stairs. Throwing her arms around him, she kissed him more deeply than she'd ever kissed anyone in her life.

Overcome at the sight of her, Josh watched as she raced up to him. When she embraced him and kissed him, he melted into her arms immediately, wrapping his own arms around her without even thinking. All he knew was that before he was miserable and now he was complete.

When at last she separated from his lips, still holding him in her arms, Grace smiled at him and pulled him into a hug. "I couldn't *do* it, Joss! I *love* you too much! I told that old bat just where she could *stuff* it and ran here as fast as I could! You were *right!* I *was* being a coward! *Please* forgive me?"

Slowly processing what she was saying, Josh began to smile and hug her in return. "Of *course*, Grace! I'll *always* forgive you! I love you, *too!*"

Pulling back slowly to look him in the eyes, stunned at hearing the words, it dawned on her that she'd finally told Josh to his face that she loved him. "*Joss? You... you love me?*"

Nodding with an ever-growing smile, he pressed his forehead against hers. "I've known for a *while* now. I was just too scared to say it out *loud*."

Giggling, Grace hugged him tightly once more. "I *love* you, Joss! And I *love* your gift! It's the *second* most beautiful thing I've ever *seen*! *Thank* you!"

Smiling together, they both heard the knock on the door. Looking down at his parents, they watched Fred move off to answer it.

"*Judy*!" he said, only half surprised to see her. They'd met a few times when she'd come over to pick up Josh, but his son had made sure to limit their contact, still remembering the trauma of his parents meeting the Healys. "Come *in*!" he offered.

"*Thank* you, Fred." she said politely. "Is *Grace* here?" Looking around, she spotted the two at the top of the stairs. "*Grace*!"

"I'm *not* going back, Mom!" the girl said sternly. "I don't care *what* you do to me, that woman's a nasty *bitch* and I'm *not* spending *my* birthday anywhere *near* her or that human *octopus* she brought with her!"

"It's *alright*, Grace!" her mother explained. "She's *gone*. So's that vile little *troll* she brought with her! I threw them *out*!"

Grace's countenance brightened as she stared down at Judy. "*Really*! You *did* that? For *me*?" Seeing her mother nod, Grace hurried downstairs with Josh in tow, refusing to let go of his hand until she stood next to her mother.

"You're *wonderful*, Mom!" she stated as she wrapped Judy in a hug.

When at last Grace let go and returned to holding Josh's hand, Melanie had finally had enough. "OK, so what's going *on* then?"

Even as Grace opened her mouth to explain, Josh answered, "It's *nothing*, Melanie. Just a big misunderstanding between Grace and I. Everything's *fine*

now!" When Grace gave him a questioning look, he imperceptibly shook his head, indicating that he didn't want his parents involved.

Swallowing nervously, Grace took both of Josh's hands. "*Jocelyn? Would you go out to dinner with me tonight? Please?*"

With a smile, Josh nodded enthusiastically. "Of *course* I will, Grace! Let me get my purse!"

The two sat with Judy at the same restaurant that Josh and his parents had gone to his first day out as a girl. He listened quietly while Grace and Judy took turns explaining the events of the afternoon.

"So *that's* when I told her off!" Grace stated. "I could take a *lot* from her, but I just *couldn't* take her bad-mouthing *you*... or your *gift*! It's the most *beautiful* thing I've ever *seen*, Joss... second to *you*, of course!"

Blushing, Josh just picked at his salad.

Judy nodded in agreement. "It *is*, Jocelyn. Where did you get it done?"

"I *made* it." he stated shyly. "Over the summer in woodworking class. I told my parents I was at a trans therapy group that meets in the same building."

Looking at him in stunned silence, Judy broke the spell first. "You... you *made* that? *Jocelyn!* You have a *wonderful* talent! It's *beautiful!*"

Grace took his hand and squeezed it gently. "That makes it even *better* than if you'd bought it, Joss! You did all *that*... for *me*?"

Shrugging, Josh took a bite and swallowed before answering. "I just wish I could have *known* him. He seems like he was a *wonderful* man. While I was making it, I thought a lot about *why* he chose to do what he did... join the military, I mean... and spend so much time away from the people he loved...

only to end up dying so far from home." Looking up at Grace, he smiled weakly. "Then one day, it just suddenly clicked into place. It all made *sense*."

Squeezing Grace's hand, he sighed and looked at her with love in his eyes.

"He did it for *you*."

Chapter 21 - High School Memories

Before the end of the month, Grace had her driver's license and the two spent their first evening out alone without Judy. It was a simple dinner at a fast food place and then a movie, but she and Josh enjoyed it just the same.

The following Sunday, Grace was driving him to the church on Spring Drive instead of him taking the bus as usual.

"You *sure* you want to go with me?" he asked, sitting in the passenger seat and looking at her. "I appreciate the ride, but it doesn't mean *you* have to go."

She glanced at him before turning her eyes back to the road. "Yes, I *want* to go, Joss! I wanna meet these people that you care about so much that I can't see you every Sunday morning!"

Pulling her mother's car into the church lot, Grace found a spot and parked. Climbing out, Josh explained some things as they walked toward the doors.

"No hand-holding, Grace." he warned her. "And no making eyes at each other or talking about us being a couple. Pastor Roberts has a rule, and it's not just for *same-sex* couples. '*Church is a house of worship, not a dating club.*' He gives that lecture to nearly *all* the kids in the congregation."

"I understand, Joss." she said with a smile as she looked at him. "You look *nice*, though!"

Grinning back at her, he answered happily. "You *too*!"

The two entering the doorway, Daniel was there as usual. "*Jocelyn!* Your turn to bring a guest?"

Shaking his hand, Josh introduced her. "Pastor Roberts? This is my best friend, Grace! She wanted to know what the *fuss* was all about!"

Daniel Roberts beamed at her as he shook her hand as well. "Glad you decided to *come*, Grace! *Love* the name!" The three laughing together, he gestured inward. "Won't you find a seat, ladies?"

Entering the sanctuary, Josh directed Grace to the pew he normally sat in near the back. Taking their seats, he felt a tap on his shoulder and turned around. "Good *morning*, Mr. and Mrs. Mason!" he said warmly.

"Good *morning*, Jocelyn!" the older woman responded in kind as they all stood up to greet one another.

"This is my best friend *Grace*, Mrs. Mason!" he said as Grace and the woman shook hands. "She decided to join us this morning!"

"Very nice to meet *any* friend of *Jocelyn's*!" she smiled genuinely as Grace turned to shake Mr. Mason's hand. "She's such a *thoughtful* and *considerate* young lady! It does my heart glad to know she has good friends!"

Sitting back down, Josh sighed happily as Grace looked at him. "How many people here know you, Joss?" she whispered.

Shrugging, he did a quick mental inventory. "Um... a little less than half of them, really." he whispered back.

Looking around the room, Grace was surprised. "*Joss*, there are like four hundred people here! You know *half* of them? And they know *you*?"

"They know *Jocelyn*." he clarified quietly. "Not *me*. Only you, your mom, and the Healys know *me*... and I'm not sure about your mom. She still calls me *Jocelyn*."

Nodding in understanding, Grace tried to cover for her mother. "She just doesn't want to slip up in front of someone like your parents, Joss. *Believe* me, she *gets* it. She just wants to help and not make things even *worse*. If

she could afford it, she'd buy you guy clothes so you wouldn't have to wear *girly* stuff all the time!"

"Fat lot of good *that* would do." he countered quietly. "I look like a *tomboy*!" When the service started, Josh listened to the pastor's sermon intently. Still agnostic, he nevertheless enjoyed the effort of coming to understand people who believed in something they could neither see nor hear, only feel. He understood that. He looked like a girl and sounded like a girl, but he didn't *feel* like one. All the empirical evidence said he was a transgendered girl, but he still knew it to be wrong. For him, it was a matter of faith.

After the sermon, the congregation sang and truly enjoyed their time as a community. When people started to leave, Josh and Grace began walking out with the others, stopping to talk to a few families Josh knew on the way. Before they got to the door, he heard Daniel call out to him.

"*Jocelyn*! Glad I *caught* you!" Glancing at Grace, he gestured back into the sanctuary. "Could I have a moment of your time before you go?"

Looking over at his girlfriend, Josh shrugged. "*Sure*, Pastor Roberts!"

Leading the two back in, Daniel looked at them each in turn and lowered his voice so it wouldn't carry beyond the three of them. "*Jocelyn*, can I assume that this young lady is the girl you came to me to ask about?" Seeing Josh nod seriously after a moment, he continued. "I just wanted to make sure this isn't the start of an effort to force your... *situation*... on the congregation. I don't for a *minute* believe that you would, but I have a solemn duty to protect *everyone* who comes here, *including* you, so I just need to hear you *say* it."

"Pastor Roberts," Josh said earnestly, "I have *no* intention of letting *anyone* here know *anything* about my private matters. Coming here is too important to me to try and change people's minds, not that shoving it in their face would do any good, anyway. In fact, it'd probably make it *worse*. Even if I were a boy, it wouldn't be any different. My private life is *not* for public debate."

Relieved, he smiled at Josh. "I *knew* you'd understand, Jocelyn! You're a credit to this congregation!"

"Pastor?" Grace interjected. "I get that you don't want there to be trouble, but would you *really* prevent Joss from coming if people knew about us?"

"I'd *have* to, Grace." he said seriously. "For her own good. I may not *agree* with your... *relationship*... but I try not to judge. I can't prevent *others* from judging though, in *very* un-Christian ways. I can't allow that, for *their* sakes!"

Driving home after saying their good-byes, the two were quiet. Finally, Grace spoke up. "I can't agree with Pastor Roberts, Joss. You *should* be free to express who you are *anywhere* and not worry about getting attacked!"

Josh shook his head disagreeingly. "*No*, Grace. He's *right*. Trying to force your opinion of how things should be on others is *wrong*, no matter *how* much you think it may be right. Just look at my parents. They're *certain* I'm a girl. That doesn't make *forcing* it on me right, *does* it?"

"I *suppose*." she said as she drove. "I just think if they're as nice as they're *supposed* to be, they should be able to handle you being different! I mean, take that Mrs. Mason! *She* seems like she wouldn't be mean just because you're a boy forced to be a girl, or we love each other! What's the big deal?"

"It's no big deal to you or me, but it is to *them*." he pointed out. "They're entitled to their opinion on *any* subject, Grace. Trying to force them to accept something they fervently disagree with not only would be wrong, it would be *impossible*! You can't *force* people to change their minds."

"I'm not talking about *forcing* anyone to change their minds, Joss." she argued. "I'm talking about how they should be *anyway*!"

"According to who? *You*? My *parents*? OK, so *you* think they should accept apparently same-sex couples. My parents think they shouldn't believe in

God *at all* and should be forced to disband the church. The congregation would disagree with all *three* of you. Who's right?"

Wanting to answer that she was right, it occurred to her that she was being just as arrogant about her own opinions as Josh's parents were about theirs. Her mouth opening and then closing, she furrowed her brow. "I *guess* I see your point. Doesn't mean I have to *like* it!"

Looking out the window, Josh sighed. "The hardest part of being tolerant is actually *tolerating* people you disagree with and letting them have their opinions without trying to change them."

"But how can we expect to improve if we don't try to change things for the *better*?" she pointed out. "You can't make society more accepting by *hiding*!"

"You can't make society more accepting by shoving it down their throats, either." he countered. "Society is just the collective opinions of *individuals*. It'll only change if the *individuals* change, which they only ever do of their own free will. Things aren't better today because intolerant people were forced to accept what they found unacceptable. Intolerant people have just become the minority, so their opinion doesn't count for much. Trying to force it on them just made people mad about it. It does more harm than good."

Spending the rest of the day together, they let the subject drop and enjoyed their time alone. By the time Josh turned sixteen two months later, they began to think about their futures.

"I think I'm going to go to art school." Josh told her one Saturday afternoon over a cup of coffee. "I'm getting pretty good, and I like it a lot! The only thing is, I think I should have a *fallback* career, in case it doesn't turn out."

Grace nodded as she sipped her tea. "Well, you're good at logic and debate. You could become a lawyer... or a *politician*!"

Laughing at the suggestion, Josh shook his head. "Oh *yeah!* That'd be a *real* hoot! Imagine me running for office? With *male* on my birth certificate?"

"You know the Democrat Party would *love* to have you!" she pointed out.

"The feeling *isn't* mutual." he countered. "I *hate* politics! It's the reason my life *sucks* so much! My parents and their *activism!*"

Grace shrugged. "Just a suggestion. I was thinking about one of the military academies. I might try for Annapolis... or maybe the Air Force Academy."

"Hmm..." Josh considered. "Annapolis is only four hundred miles away, but the Air Force Academy is in *Colorado*, isn't it?" Seeing Grace nod, he sighed resignedly. "Well, I guess I'll start looking at colleges around *both* places... just in case!"

Giggling, Grace eyed him hungrily. "You could always just be my *housewife*, Joss! Would you *mind* being a 'kept woman'?"

Choking on his coffee, he giggled along with her once he managed to get the dark beverage out of his nose. "Oh *great!* I can see my mother now! *Screaming* at me for the rest of *time* for 'lowering myself' to the level of some *stepford* wife!"

"It wouldn't be like that!" Grace argued. "You don't honestly *agree* with that idea, do you?"

"*No.*" Josh admitted. "Not at *all*. In fact, I could think of nothing that would be more gratifying than raising our kids for you!"

"I suppose we can adopt." Grace sighed sadly.

"*Why?*" he asked. "I have 'stuff' on ice."

Staring at Josh perplexedly, Grace slowly put her cup down. "What? *How?*"

Realizing he'd never gotten into detail about that day, he fully explained the excuse his mother had used to trick him into his castration. "So, if you're willing, we *can* have our own kids."

Thinking about it for the first time, Grace smiled. "I think I'd *love* having your children, Joss!" Her smile melting, she looked at him seriously. "Um... Joss? After you turn eighteen, are you gonna... you know... *revert?* Go back to being a boy? Or... I guess a *man* at that point. I'll love you either way!"

Looking off, Josh's voice became distant. "I honestly don't know that I *can*, Grace. I've tried looking more guyish a few times, but I always come off just looking like a butch girl or a tomboy. If I got on testosterone it might help, but everything I've read says it won't fix me. I look too girlish to be a guy, but I feel too guyish to be a girl. I just don't fit in *anywhere!*"

Taking his hand, Grace smiled at him. "*That's* OK, Joss. I love you either way... or *neither* way!" Changing the subject, she turned to him again. "Joss? Spring Fling is coming up. Will you be my date? For *real* this time?"

Smiling, Josh nodded. "Of *course!* I was wondering when you were gonna ask! I already have the perfect dress!"

Giggling at his exuberance, Grace shook her head. "Are you *sure* you're a guy, Joss? You're awfully excited about what *dress* you're going to wear!"

Rolling his eyes, Josh glowered at her sarcastically. "*Yes*, I'm *sure!* That doesn't mean I don't like looking *good!* If I can't look good in a tux, at least I can look good *tucked* under your arm!" he smiled, loving Grace's groan.

Three weeks later he was checking himself in his closet mirror before going downstairs. The dress was one he'd bought for church, but decided that it was too formal for that and it had sat in his closet ever since. He'd thought

about just wearing black slacks and a plain white blouse, but he knew he would just look like a girl who didn't dress up, like the stoner girls who hung out in jeans and flannels in the corner with their wastoid boyfriends.

Seeing how the peach dress hugged his waist and made him look even more curvaceous than he was naturally, he sighed at the too-feminine image that shone back at him. Grabbing the matching clutch, he checked his hair and makeup one last time before heading out of the room and down the stairs.

"Wow!" Grace stared as he descended, making him blush at the compliment. "Joss, you look... *wow!*"

Josh watched her walk over to him wearing a dark blue strapless dress that made her look much older than sixteen. "*Thanks! You look amazing, Grace!*"

Her turn to blush and giggle at his little pun, she took his hand. "*Thank you!*" she said shyly.

"Turn around, girls!" Fred insisted. "*Smile!*" Holding his smartphone, he took several pictures and fiddled with it for a moment. "*There! I sent Judy the best one!*" Walking up to them, he hugged Josh warmly. "Have a good time, princess! Come home when you're ready! We'll see you tomorrow!"

Disappointed that his parents were willing to let their sixteen-year-old stay out all night alone with his date, Josh smiled weakly. "*Yes, Daddy! We'll be careful!*" he added, trying to emphasize that his father hadn't even thought to say it anymore.

Melanie sat on the couch watching them over her phone as the two left without even saying goodbye to her.

Seeing his wife agitated, Fred looked at her. "She knows what you've done for her, Mel. *All* teenage girls naturally think their mothers don't understand them... *that's* all! Remember how *you* felt about *your* mom at that age?"

"I could understand if I handed down draconian edicts on her like *my* mother did, Fred!" she spat. "I let her do anything she likes, and she *still* treats me like every day is some kind of trial to be endured! Like I'm *forcing* her to do unreasonable things!" Putting down her phone, she sighed. "I just feel I got the worst of both deals! When she was younger, she and I *should* have been closer, but we treated her like a boy so she was closer to *you*. Now that she's growing up, she's *Daddy's Princess* and I'm the ogre that she *hates*!"

Pulling his wife to her feet, Fred hugged her and tried to comfort her. "It's alright, Mel. She'll come around. *You'll* see."

Grace parked in the lot south of the school gym where the dance was held. The Spring Fling was only one of two dances of the year, the other being Homecoming, that any student was welcome. All others were segregated by year. Even so, not many juniors or seniors attended Spring Fling, most calling it 'Kiddy Prom' and looking down on the kids who took it seriously.

Turning off the engine, she looked over at her date and smiled sardonically. "You know, my *mom* is a chaperone this year!"

Nodding, Josh gazed at his lap. "I know. *Sorry*!"

"It's *fine*!" she laughed lightly. "Not like I was planning on swabbing your tonsils with my tongue on the dance floor or anything!"

"*Eww*!" Josh huzzed. "You can be *so* gross sometimes!"

Giggling a moment, the two slowly turned serious. "*Joss? I love you.*"

Smiling and blushing, he looked down at his hands in the lap of his skirt again. "I love you *too*, Grace!"

Scooting over, she reached out and turned Josh's face toward hers with a fingertip. Kissing him gently, the two lost themselves in the moment, their

passions held in check only through their own will. Slowly ending their kiss, she smiled at him when he leaned his forehead against hers. "*Shall we?*"

"*Let's!*" he said with a giggle.

Climbing out of her mother's car after a quick makeup check, the two made their way to the gym door, Josh taking Grace's arm. Passing through the entrance, they nodded to the school councilor who was checking for dress code violations. "Good *evening*, Mr. Grayson!" they said together with a laugh as they noted his irritation at not being able to stop Josh from entering.

Walking into the dance, they saw a lot of kids were already there, though others were still on their way in behind them even as they entered. Mostly being other sophomores and freshmen, the two were among the oldest there. Spotting Judy, Josh finger-waved at her with a smile before the next song started and the couple went out on the dance floor.

When at last the evening came to an unremarkable end, the three, Josh, Grace, and Judy, all drove to Grace's home together. The plan was to let the two of them spend more time with one another at her house before the girl would drive him home.

Judy sighed happily as she watched her daughter drive. "I'm really very proud of you, Grace." she remarked. "You've become a *wonderful* young woman!"

"*Thanks*, Mom!" she said cheerily. "That means a *lot!*"

"I remember when *I* was your age when I first got my driver's license. I... um... I took my father's car one night without asking and drove it to my boyfriend's house!"

"Would that be one *Greg Long*, Judy?" Josh asked from the back seat with a sly grin.

Blushing, the woman nodded. "Yes! I told him I had permission to be out that night. He was skeptical, but took my word for it. When the cops pulled us over for driving a stolen car..."

"Grandpa Dillard called the *cops* on you?" Grace said in surprise.

"Yes!" she said mortified. "Well, not on *me*, they had no idea *I* took the car! They thought I was still up in my room and that it was actually *stolen*!"

"Oh!" the two teens chorused.

"To make a long story short, we were dragged down to the police station, booked, jailed, and my parents showed up to get me. They tried to blame Greg, but I wouldn't leave until they dropped the charges and let him go!"

"Wow, Mom!" Grace exclaimed. "That was a pretty brave thing to do! They might have just *left* you there to try and teach you a *lesson*!"

Shaking her head, Judy disagreed as Grace pulled into the driveway. "No, I *knew* they would do the right thing once they knew all the facts. *Anyway*, I'm glad that *you* aren't as rebellious as *I* was at your age! I don't think I could *handle* a second me!"

Going inside, and once Judy had changed out of her nice outfit, Josh and Grace relaxed in the living room with her and continued to talk.

"*Speaking* of Mr. Long, Mom..." Grace said with an impish smile, "I notice you've been talking to him a lot on the phone! Anything going *on* there?"

"That's none of your *business*, young lady!" Judy chided her. "Greg and I are just catching up with one another! We were friends first before he was my *boyfriend*, you know!"

"You mean like *Joss* and me?" Grace pointed out.

"A little, yes." Judy admitted. "Just goes to show you that when you're in High School, the people you like may not be who you're *meant* for."

"*Mom!*" Grace yelled. "How can you even *say*..."

Judy interrupted her tirade. "I'm not saying that you and Jocelyn aren't *serious* Grace, or that you *aren't* meant for one another! I'm just pointing out that if something *were* to happen and you two *were* to break up, that it wouldn't mean your life was *over*!" When she saw Grace was calmed down some, she continued. "When Greg and I broke up, it was the end of the *world* to me. I thought I'd *never* love anyone ever again." Contemplating the picture above the fireplace, she sighed. "Then I met *Scott*."

Grace looked at her hand as it held Josh's. "I get what you're *saying*, Mom. I just hope nothing *does* happen! I can't *imagine* a future that doesn't have my *Joss* in it!"

"I'm sure you can't." her mother said understandingly. "Just like I couldn't imagine a future without *Greg* when I was your age." Seeing Grace fume at the idea of it, Judy dismissed her fears. "I'm sure you two will be just *fine*!"

Driving Josh the scant six blocks home just after midnight, Grace couldn't help but feel agitated. Seeing her upset, Josh tried to calm her fears.

"Grace? It's *fine*! *We're* fine! I know that *whatever* happens, I am *never* going to leave you and you're *never* going to leave *me*!"

"I know." Grace said as she furrowed her brow. "I just... I don't like the idea that I *could* get over losing you the way Mom got over losing Greg. It's *stupid*, I know... but I just can't *help* it! It... it's *terrifying* to think I even *could* live without you!"

Unable to help, Josh just stared out the window until they pulled up along the curb out in front of his house.

When Grace turned off the motor, she quickly slid over next to him and wrapped her arms around him. "I *love* you, Joss! *So* much!" she nearly cried before kissing him desperately. After several minutes of them making out and holding one another, she slowly started to calm down. "Sorry, Joss!" she giggled. "I guess I just sort of needed you to be close for a bit! The idea of losing you *scares* me! When I think about what nearly happened on my birthday... how I almost *lost* you over my stupid fears..."

Taking her hand, Josh looked deep into her eyes. "Me *too*, Grace. I guess the best we can do is just *be* there for each other and promise never to let little things get in the way ever again. I'd rather *die* than see you unhappy!"

Kissing one more time, she walked him up to his door. "Goodnight, Joss!" she smiled at him. "See you tomorrow morning?"

Nodding, Josh smiled back just as happily. "*Tomorrow!*"

With one last desperate kiss, Grace tore herself away from him and stepped backward down the walkway. Josh stood in front of his door, not wanting to go in until she'd left. Giggling at each other and their silly sentimentality, Grace at last turned toward her mother's car and walked away, waving at him one last time as she started to drive off. Josh quietly made his way in through the front door, not wanting to disturb his parents, and had just turned off the porch light when he was spooked by Melanie's voice.

"Have a good *time*?" she asked, making him turn and draw in a breath.

"*Melanie!*" he gasped. "What are *you* doing up so late? You *startled* me!"

"Just was waiting up to see if you were coming home is all." she said nonchalantly as she put down her phone. "So, *did* you have a good time?"

Drifting on the pleasant memories of the evening, he nodded as he started slowly walking toward the stairs. "*Yes!*"

"Why didn't you invite Grace in?" she asked.

"She had to get *home*." he retorted, his happiness collapsing into the black hole of his mother's pressuring. "Judy worries when she's driving at night."

"Why didn't you just stay at *her* place then?"

Rolling his eyes, he looked at her as though she'd asked the dumbest question in history. "Because Judy didn't *want* me to, *that's* why! *God*, Melanie! We're only *sixteen*! Why the third degree? What's it to you *what* we do?"

Standing up, she walked over to him and glowered. "I'm just concerned is all! You should be all *over* each other already, and yet you're refusing to take advantage of the opportunities I provide you! Opportunities I would have done *anything* to have when I was your age!"

"I'm not *you*, Melanie!" he shouted. "I'm *nothing* like you! Thank *God*!"

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" she demanded as she crossed her arms.

Angry that his mother had ruined what was up to that point a wonderful evening, he glared at her. "*Oooo*! You just don't *get* it! You never *will*! I'm *glad* I'm nothing like you! If I was, I'd probably *kill* myself!" Turning, he stormed up the stairs, slammed his door, and locked it before dropping onto his bed to cry himself to sleep.

Chapter 22 - This Too Shall Pass

Josh was finally ready. Having spent most of the day getting his hair and nails done, a complete facial, and then almost two hours to get dressed, he looked at the final product. Trying to make himself like what he saw, he still hated the vision of young womanhood staring back at him from his closet mirror. Seventeen and hours away from his Junior Prom, he was irreparably and unmistakably a woman in all but the most basic of ways. *No one would even believe you if you told them you were a boy.* he ridiculed himself as he examined the beautiful woman in his mirror.

Suddenly he was reminded of the Sunday when his semi-open secret had gotten out at the one place that he didn't want to be known as Josh.

Grace walked with Josh in through the front doors of the church, greeting Pastor Roberts as usual and taking their usual seat in their usual pew. As they waited, she and Josh both started to overhear the conversation being held just behind them.

"So anyway," Mrs. Mason continued, "I heard from Mrs. Ashberry that he goes to the local High School! Just think about that, Henry! A boy dressed like a girl... right here in our area! Using the same restrooms as the girls! The same changing rooms for PE! I ask you, how can you not care! What if our granddaughter were going to that school? Would you want her being seen naked by a boy?"

Henry Mason sighed, sick of her harping on the issue even after they'd gotten to church. "Quiet, Edith! This is hardly the place to talk about it!"

"Why not?" she asked, incensed that he wasn't more upset. "This is God's house and He would condemn such things..."

"Edith!" he shouted in a whisper, looking embarrassedly to see that Josh was turning around to look at them with fear in his eyes. "Edith, this is not

the place to discuss it! We are here to glorify God, not discuss politics!" Seeing that both Grace and Josh were fully listening to their conversation, he turned crimson. "Sorry, girls. Mrs. Mason was just about to apologize to you two for disturbing you... right dear?"

Narrowing her eyes at him, Edith Mason turned to the two youths. "I most certainly was not, Henry! They understand! Don't you girls? It's just not right for a boy to impersonate a girl and be free to roam in and out of the restroom when you're using it! It's disgusting and perverted!"

Having had about enough, and tempted to grab Josh and kiss him right in front of her, Grace instead turned in her seat and glared. "Mrs. Mason," she whispered angrily, "I agree with Mr. Mason. I don't think this is the place!"

Turning to Josh as Grace angrily turned her back on the woman, she hoped for at least one ally. "Jocelyn, you're a fine Christian girl! I'm sure you'd never want anything to do with such people! Am I right? You're nothing like them!"

Swallowing hard, Josh whispered the best answer he could. "Mrs. Mason? The girl you're talking about? I know her. She'd do anything to be normal, but she has no choice. That choice was made for her. Mr. Mason's right, though. This isn't the place to talk about it."

As Josh turned and looked away, Edith sat back in her seat, but refused to apologize. The next week, Josh and Grace sat in a different pew.

Checking one last time, Josh picked up the small pink clutch that matched his gown and dropped his phone in, snapping it shut. The ankle-length princess gown rustling with each step, he left his room and made his way downstairs once more to be photographed and embarrassed by his father.

Prom was uneventful, save for typical instances of jocks trying to spike the punch bowl and other teenage angst. Josh had long ago disappeared into the

background to be quietly ignored and snubbed by his peers, but that was fine by him. He was content to just be there with Grace at his side.

After the Prom, as Grace drove them back to her house for some time alone, Judy and Greg having gone out themselves for the evening, the two were anxious to reach the girl's empty home and finally lose themselves in each other. "I *love* you." Josh said to her dreamily.

Smiling wickedly, Grace never took her eyes off the road. "I love you *too*, Joss! I can't *wait* to get you home to show you how *much*!"

"Are you glad we waited?" he asked unsure of himself. "Are you *sure* you don't want to wait until..."

"*No*!" Grace interrupted him. "I don't want to waste one more *second* I can spend with you, Joss! I *need* you!" Sliding her hand toward him, she smiled when he took it and squeezed it, letting go to put it back on the wheel.

"I just want you to be *sure*, Grace." he sighed. "I can wait, even if I don't *want* to! I *love* you too much!" Glancing over at Grace who just smiled as she watched the road, thinking about what the rest of the evening might have in store for them, Josh giggled just before he blacked out.

Waking up slowly, Josh wasn't sure where he was. His eyes wouldn't focus and he felt adrift and weak. Trying to move, he found himself restrained and began to panic. The dreamlike unreality of it all, most especially the detached feeling of no real sensations, made him relax. *I'm dreaming.*

He'd never managed to lucid dream before, but figured that since he knew now that it was a dream he could do anything he wanted. Trying to move again, he felt the vague disassociated sensation of pain and stopped. It hadn't actually hurt, it was more like a distant memory of pain that dreams have. Going with the flow, he tried once more to open his eyes, but they refused to focus.

"So *anyway*, that's about all I *could* do." the girl's voice said. "*Jocelyn?*"

Furrowing his brow, he revolted at the name haunting his dream. Working to place the voice, he couldn't quite manage it, or remember much at all.

"*Jocelyn!*" it said again, sounding joyful. "Oh my God, *Joss!* I thought you were *never* going to wake up!"

Finally able to put together the voice into something he could remember, he giggled lightly. *Now I know it's a dream!* he laughed at himself. Forcing his vision to focus on the voice that came from the bodiless face hovering over him, he smiled. "I *miss* you Trace! You were my best friend!" Hearing a sniff come from the fuzzy apparition, he knew she was crying.

"I *know*, Joss! I missed you, *too!*" Tracy said through sniffs, trying to hold back her tears. "I... when I heard what happened, I came down here right away! Davie *too!* We've been coming to see you every day after school ever since! He's downstairs getting a coffee right now."

While she spoke, Josh's head started to clear and his vision and memory began to improve. The background behind Tracy's head slowly resolved into the image of a hospital room. Blinking back the fog in his brain, Josh slowly started to feel real again. "This... this isn't a *dream?*" he asked.

Sadly, Tracy shook her head. "I wish it *were*, Joss. I'm *so* sorry! I know I've been *terrible* to you these last few years! I... I said some *awful* things about you behind your back, just so people would *like* me, but I don't *care* about that anymore! I just... I just want my *sister* back!"

Recalling their falling out over Tracy's insistence that he was actually a girl, Josh's attitude changed from glad to irritated. "Your *sister*... right." he sighed. Pausing a moment, it dawned on him that he didn't know how he'd gotten there. "Wait, what *am* I doing here? Where the hell *am* I?"

"Southwest General." she answered. "Don't you remember what happened?"

"No!" he answered with annoyance. "Would I *ask* how I got here if I *did*?"

Suddenly quiet, Tracy got up. "I... I should get a nurse." she said nervously. "Be right back!"

Watching her leave, he looked around and noticed that he was strapped to the bed. Wanting to be able to get up, he searched to find the release and unclipped it, slowly easing it away from his body.

"Oh, *no* you don't!" the nurse said as he came in and hooked the strap back in place. "We don't want you spilling out of bed if you have *another* seizure."

Blinking at the large black man wearing green scrubs, Josh shook his head to clear it. "A *seizure*? I had a *seizure*?"

"Three." he said, checking the teen's vitals. "One before you *got* here."

Believing that he may be beginning to understand what happened to him, Josh cleared his throat. "Did... did *Grace* bring me here? What *day* is it?"

Furrowing his brow, the nurse looked away. "Wednesday afternoon."

His eyes shooting open, Josh tried to grasp it. *I've been here since Saturday night! Nearly four days!* Realizing he'd missed church Sunday, he resolved to reach out to Pastor Roberts and let him know he was OK. Looking at the man studying him, Josh swallowed. "Um... are my parents here?"

"They went home a bit ago." he said in his smooth voice. "You've had guests since you were admitted! You got lots of people that care about you!"

Grimacing at the idea, he could only call to mind a few. *Grace, Judy, Pastor Roberts and some of the congregation, Trace and Dave too... I guess,*

Melanie and Daddy at least think they care about me! Not able to think of anyone else at first, he mentally added a few more. *Jennifer of course, and Vicky and John... maybe Luke.* Sure that he'd gotten everybody, he smiled up at the nurse. "I guess so."

"Well, you rest here and I'll go call your doctor and your folks, alright?"

"Can you call Grace and Judy, too? *Judy Wright?*" he asked, more interested in seeing them than his parents.

Stopping, he shook his head. "Let's start with your folks. *They* can call whoever else needs to know, alright?"

As the nurse left, Josh saw an almost unfamiliar face staring at him from the hallway. If it weren't for the fact that he'd seen him here and there over the past few years, he wouldn't have been able to place him. "D... *Dave?*"

Walking in slowly, his hands stuffed in his front pockets, David Edwards shuffled in nervously. "Um... *hey*, Jocelyn! Have a good nap?"

Chuckling and noticing it hurt, he tried not to. "You're so *full* of it, Dave!"

The boy looked down and away as a smile cracked on his face. "Yeah... nice callback, dude... um... I mean..."

Josh shook his head again, making him dizzy. "It's *fine*, Dave! I'm not gonna jump your shit over that!" Seeing him relax, Josh sighed happily. "Can't say I care for *how* I got to see you... but I'll take it! Could you do me a favor?"

"Sure thing." David said as he pulled his hands out of his pockets. "Want some water or somethin'?"

"Not right now." Josh said, shaking his head slowly this time. "I... would you *call* someone for me? Judy Wright. She's my um... girlfriend's mom."

"Yeah, I know." he said glumly. "I think *everyone* at school knew about you two. You want me to call her mom?"

"No, you call *Aunt Joyce*, Mom!" he joked, making the other boy groan at the wordplay. "Would you call Judy for me though? *Please?*"

"Hey, don't *even* try those 'little girl eyes' on me!" David countered. "They don't work on me and it's creepy as *hell* coming from you!" Laughing for a moment, David nervously looked away. "So, uh... you want me to call her?"

"If you wouldn't mind." Josh begged. "Just dial and hand me the phone." Giving him the number, David pulled out his cell phone and dialed. Once he heard it ring, he handed the mobile device over to Josh.

After a few rings, Judy answered. "*Hello?*"

"*Judy!*" Josh exclaimed.

"*Jocelyn?*" she replied. "Oh my God, *Jocelyn!* You're *awake?*"

"Only just." he answered. "I woke up a bit ago and borrowed a phone to call right away. I still don't know what *happened*. A nurse told me I had like, three seizures. Is *Grace* there? I want to let her know I'm OK!" Silence greeted him as he saw the shocked look on David's face. "*Hello? Judy? You still there?*"

"*Yes.*" she answered. "I'm *here*, Joss. Didn't they tell you what *happened?*"

"Just what I said... that I had a seizure." His thoughts clouded over as he saw David turn away. "*Judy... where's Grace?*"

Another interminable silence followed as his mind raced with what might have happened. Finally, Judy answered. "There... there was an *accident*,

Jocelyn. Your car was hit by a drunk driver." A silence stretched on for what seemed like hours before Judy said, "She's *gone*, Jocelyn. Grace *died*."

Josh dropped the phone into his lap. Slowly, it slid down and off his bed, landing on the floor with a thundering clatter. "*No...*" he whimpered.

Scooping up the phone, David looked at it before putting it up to his ear. "*Hello? Mrs. Wright? This is David... David Edwards. I'm a friend of Joss's. She uh... she dropped the phone.*"

Judy collected herself. "Is he... is she *alright?*"

Looking at Josh, David shook his head. "I don't think so, Mrs. Wright. She looks... *catatonic*, I think."

Josh's mind was a blur as his entire world collapsed around him. Vague feelings of anger, loneliness, and an unendurable sadness slowly started to fill his mind, threatening to drown him in sorrow and pain. His barely endurable existence, only made livable by the bright light of Grace, fell apart as he descended once more into his own personal living hell.

Slowly coming back into awareness, Josh found himself being held by his mother. Initially repulsed by her, he couldn't help but grasp on to what little affection he could find.

"It's alright, baby." she soothed him, rocking back and forth and petting his long brown hair. "It's *alright*."

Desperately, he wrapped his arms around her and clung to her for dear life. "She's *dead!* Grace is *dead!*" he began to sob uncontrollably into his mother's comforting shoulder.

"I *know*, sweetheart." Melanie answered softly. "I *know*."

"*Princess?*" Fred announced himself, emotion choking his voice and not even trying to hide it. "We're *here*, sweetie. We'll get *through* this."

Bawling like a four-year-old, Josh cried for what seemed to be hours before exhaustion claimed him once more as he passed into a restless sleep.

He awoke facing the sun streaming in through the window. Blinking through his dried tears, he didn't look away. He just lay there and existed.

Days passed and still he lay there. While his body was healing, his mind, heart, and spirit were all dying. Aware of what was going on around him, he nevertheless refused to engage with anyone or anything. Convinced that his life was nothing but an endless turmoil of pain, torture, and sorrow, only interrupted by teasing moments of happiness for them to be cruelly snatched away, he lay there just watching the sunbeams filter through the blinds in the morning, only to shift and fade with the passing day and disappear with the night.

After a week of near catatonia, Josh roused one Thursday to a familiar voice.

"Good morning, *Jocelyn*."

Moving just his eyes, his vision came to rest on the face of his pastor.

"I came down to see you the day after they brought you in. I called Judy to find out why you two missed church and *she* told me." Daniel stated. "We *prayed* for you, Susan and me. I'm glad to see you awake."

Not acknowledging his words, Josh simply looked back to his window.

"I... uh... I didn't tell your parents who I was." he continued. "I told them I was your councilor... which is *true*, in a way!" he chuckled lightly. "I knew you were keeping your church attendance from them." he explained. "I... I didn't want to add to your troubles." Pausing, he collected his thoughts.

"The congregation has missed you these last two weeks. They've asked about you, but I haven't told them what happened. I told them you were ill. See, there was a news article about the accident. You weren't named, but your... uh... *situation*... was. Your parents seemed to go out of their way to make sure the papers all knew that you were... well... a *boy*."

Hearing that, Josh moved his eyes to look over at the man again.

"I... um... I don't know what to *say*! You... you seem *very* much a girl to me. You always *have*. I never... well... I guess this is *one* way for the Lord to test a man's faith! I guess I just want to hear it from *you*." Daniel paused and asked the question. "*Are you a boy?*"

Looking back to his window with a blink, Josh felt that was answer enough.

"I *see*." he sighed. "You've made me do a lot of soul searching these past few days... *Jocelyn*. Examining if this is just the work of man or the work of God. I honestly don't know. What I *do* know is that you have always been a warm, kind, and *caring* member of my church, and I would hate to lose you from our family."

Stepping forward a little, he sighed again as he tried to make his way though the next thing he wanted to say. "I... I'm so sorry for your loss, *Jocelyn*. Grace was a bright light every Sunday, and I'm sure to you she was much *more* than that. This world is a darker place at her passing. I can offer no words of consolation to you that will ease the pain. For a loved one to die so young, with so much of *life* yet to live, is *more* than a loss. It's a *tragedy*."

Clearing his throat, he saw Josh look at him once more. "For you, I can only imagine how it must feel, and then I find myself realizing that I *can't* imagine it. I... I *choose* to believe that your feelings for Grace are no less than mine for Susan. Even if I *were* to lose her now, I at least would have the memories of our years together and the children we've raised. You... you lost Grace before you two even had a *chance*. I'm so sorry."

Not seeing much of any headway in reaching him, Daniel sighed once more and tried again to reach out. "I want you to know that when you're feeling better, you'll be welcome in any church I run. My sermon on Sunday is going to be on the subject of not judging others. I intend to cite your accident and what it said about you in it. I won't mention your name, but... I intend on asking them how they would feel if this was *their* daughter... *their* son... or a member of *their* congregation. That they shouldn't be so quick to judge you when they have their *own* sins condemning them... sins that are forgiven them by Christ's infinite love."

When Josh looked away to his window once more, Daniel stepped even closer. "One last thing, Jocelyn. I know right now you must feel that the pain will *never* end... that it'll surround you and *drown* you in it for the rest of your life and beyond, but I want to tell you a story. Once there was a king, and being king he wanted to seem wise no matter what was going on. So he tasked all the wise men of the kingdom to tell him what sage advice he could give to *anyone*... about *anything*... at *any* time... that would *always* be true. Finally, after months of listening to an endless parade of platitudes and witticisms, the eldest man in the kingdom came to him and offered him just four words..."

Taking Josh's hand in his, he squeezed it and sighed as a tear fell down the man's cheek. "*This too, shall pass.*' May God *bless* you, Jocelyn Ryan."

After the pastor left, Josh felt the wetness soaking his cheek, his pillowcase having become soaked in the tears that had fallen silently from his eyes.

Over the next several days, Josh slowly began to respond to people again. Tracy and David visited him several times, catching him up on the things going on at school and elsewhere. It was the following Sunday when his convalescence was broken by another voice he did not expect to hear.

"*Hi.*" Judy said from his doorway. "Mind some *company*?"

"No, that's fine, Judy." he said sadly. "I... I didn't think you'd *ever* speak to me again."

The broken woman slowly made her way into the room. "I... I wasn't *going* to." she admitted embarrassedly. "I didn't see what *good* it would do and I... it *hurt* too much."

Turning away from her, Josh stared out his window. "You must *hate* me."

"*No!*" Judy denied as she quickly crossed the room to his bed. "*Jocelyn*, I could *never* hate you! *Least* of all for *this!*" She sighed and sat in the chair on the opposite side of the bed from the window. "It isn't *your* fault! The boy that hit you was *drunk*, doing fifty miles an hour, and ran a red light! *He* is to blame! Not *you!* Why would you think I'd hate *you?*"

Torn apart, Josh couldn't even look at her. "If Grace hadn't been taking me to her house so we could be... *alone*... together for the first time, we wouldn't have *been* in the accident that killed her. If she would have just taken me home, we would have turned north a block sooner and never even *been* there to *get* hit. It's *my* fault she's dead! It should have been *me* that died! Not *her!*"

Standing up gently, Judy took Josh's hand. "I... I didn't know you two were going to...um..." Swallowing hard, she took a breath. "She *loved* you Jocelyn, as deeply as I loved Scott. You two made a *beautiful* couple. Her wanting to... *share*... that... with you... no matter that it turned out the way it did..." Tears dripped from her drawn and pale cheeks as she tried to console him. "You both *deserved* to be happy with each other, Jocelyn. I'm just sorry that it had to end... so *soon*... for you *both*."

"This too, shall pass." he said, finally understanding the pastor's words. "It's *true*. *Everything* ends." Collecting himself, he looked over at Judy. "I'll love Grace for the rest of my *life*, Judy. I *promise*."

Moving in close, she embraced Josh and cried harder than she had the night she'd lost her daughter. The two cried together for quite a while until at last Judy let him go and stepped back. "We... ah... we had the services for her last week. I'm sorry you were stuck here, but... if you like, I'll... I'll take you to *see* her... once you get released."

Nodding and wiping away his tears with the tissue she handed him, Josh looked down at the tissue in his hands, fiddling with it absently. "*Thank* you, Judy. I... I appreciate that. You don't *have* to."

"I *know*." she answered stoically. "I *want* to. Grace... would *want* me to."

The following Monday, sixteen days after the horrible night he was admitted, Josh's parents took him home. His extended stay was due to the head injury he suffered, which was also the cause of his seizures.

He knew that he was actually quite lucky to have escaped the accident with as few injuries as he had. He didn't even break a bone. The only lasting effects were his headaches, for which he was prescribed mild pain killers, and trouble sleeping, for which he was prescribed a mild sedative. His doctor had told him that even those should pass within a month, leaving him with no bodily scars to mark the event.

Instead, his scars were *much* deeper.

Josh didn't go to church the next Sunday as he had somewhere else to be. Instead he was picked up by Judy and driven to the cemetery.

Riding in silence, Josh turned to her as they approached his love's final resting place. "*Thank* you, Judy."

She didn't reply. She couldn't without breaking out in tears and completely falling apart again. Pulling in and parking, the two got out and wordlessly made their way through the grounds. Josh felt the oppression of his life

with every step, his low black heels clacking on the concrete walkway and the black of his skirt and the gray of his silk blouse matching his emotions. When at last they turned off the walkway, Judy's arm around his shoulders, she led him to the freshly dug grave, his love buried six feet beneath the fresh sod and marked by a simple gray stone.

Grace Elaine Wright he read as he came to a stop, the flowers in his hands all but forgotten. *November second, nineteen ninety-two to April tenth, two thousand ten. "She Loved Enough to Last A Lifetime"* Reading the epitaph, Josh fell to his knees and began to sob uncontrollably, his hands gripping the sod and crushing the grass and some of the flowers he'd brought for her. After a moment, he felt Judy crouch down next to him, holding him and crying alongside him. Once his feelings were spent for the moment, he took a tissue from his purse and dried his eyes, nodding at her.

"I... I'm OK, J...Judy." he choked. "I'll... be alright." Looking back to the gravestone, he turned to her again. "Could... could I have a moment... alone with her? *Please?*"

Judy sniffed and wiped her own tears away with a nod. "*Sure, sweetie. Just... just let me know when you're done, OK?*"

While Judy walked a short distance away to give Josh his last farewell, he picked up the remains of the flowers he'd brought and carried them to rest in front of the stone. Kneeling as though in prayer, he laid his hand on the cold marble. "*Grace?*" he whispered, "I... I don't know if you can hear me, but I need to say it just one more time. I *love* you! I'll *always* love you!" Standing up, with tears running down his cheeks, he sighed with a shudder before turning to walk away.

Chapter 23 - To Be or Not To Be

A month to the day after the accident, Josh went back to school. He walked into the building dressed in a black skirt, top, tights, and flats. He also carried the black backpack that Grace had used for the last three years, the same one he'd had before her. Judy let him keep it as a memento of their love, along with a few other things. He'd asked about the carving he'd given her for her sixteenth birthday, but Judy told him she'd been buried holding it, unwilling to make her daughter ever part with the gift she'd loved nearly as much as Josh himself.

Not even looking at the other students, he never saw their looks of sorrow, regret, or guilt, nor heard the solemn greetings and condolences of passers-by who hadn't spoken to him in years, if ever. He didn't care. Figuring that if they hadn't been good enough to be friendly to him before, he didn't see what difference Grace being dead mattered. He hated them all.

He wasn't interested in their pity. To his way of thinking, they'd had years to be nice. That they felt sorry for him because he nearly died and his best and only friend and love did die, meant that their feelings weren't genuine. *Nobody is my friend.* he told himself. *It's just better that way. Only horrible things happen to people who are friends with a freak like me! The boy in the skirt!*

Going through the morning, he got a month of back work and meaningless condolences from his teachers and a wide berth from his fellow students. As the day progressed, fewer people tried to extend the hand of friendship as word got around that he was being completely anti-social. When at last lunch came, he sat at the same table that he and Grace had eaten at for three years, now eating there truly alone. Just as he was about to finish and leave, he heard someone sit beside him.

"Hey." Tracy said glumly. "I'd say welcome back, but I can see you're still not feeling any better."

Sighing as he finished his last bite, he looked at her, really looked at her, for the first time in years. She'd grown up, just as he had. Her chocolate brown hair had a natural curl that made for a pretty 'frizzy' style, and her athletic tone from cheerleading made her slim and attractive. Her hazel eyes stood in contrast to her fair skin, making them seem big and beautiful. *She's really changed.* he mused.

Looking down at his tray, his lips narrowed to a thin line. "Aren't you afraid to be seen with the *freak*, Trace? What would your captain *Kelly Brooks* say? You might get thrown off the squad just for *talking* to me!" he growled in a tone that was far too feminine for his mood.

"*Joss!*" Tracy whined. "Come *on!* You are *not* a freak! You're like my *sister!* Besides, Kelly *can't* throw me off the squad, even if she *wanted* to, which she *doesn't!*" Pausing and seeing Josh's mood unchanged, she tried to reach out to him once more. "After... well... after the Prom, a bunch of us got together, *including* Kelly, and talked about how bad we all felt about how we treated you and Grace. We all just kind of *snubbed* you two all through school, and now... now Grace is gone and you... you're *hurt*, not just from the *accident*, but from what we *did*. What I'm *trying* to say is that we're *all* sorry, most *especially* me. *I* should have *known* better. You were my *BFF!*"

Getting up and then glaring down at her, Josh's stare could have welded steel. "I don't need your *pity*, Trace!" he shouted loud enough for the entire room to go quiet. "You all had *years* to realize what *bitches* you were being to me and Grace! Now that Grace is *dead*... you want *forgiveness*? *Screw you!* It's too *late!* She's *dead!* You don't *get* any forgiveness 'cuz she's not *here* to *give* it to you, so you sure as hell aren't getting any from *me!*"

Still not done, Josh let her have both barrels. "You just want me to forgive you so you don't feel bad for how you all treated us like *shit* all these years! Well, you don't *deserve* forgiveness! You've done *nothing* to undo the *five years* of abject *humiliation* you put me through! I hope it eats you *alive*, Trace! Just leave me alone!"

Stomping off, he threw his tray at the garbage can, bouncing off the rim to fall to the floor with a loud clatter as he stormed out the door, leaving a room full of students feeling guilt and shame for their own actions toward the two. In the middle of it all, Tracy began to sob.

Going to his and Grace's spot, he saw two girls he'd hoped never to run into again, Karen and Lucy, sitting there apparently waiting for him. Moving in on them like a hurricane, they didn't even get a chance to say whatever they wanted before he laid into them. "What do *you two bitches* want? To beg forgiveness for *snubbing* me ever since Jenn left and *blaming* me for her trying to *kill* herself?" He continued with a similar litany that he'd doled out to Tracy until the two left in tears.

Sitting down on the spot he and Grace spent so many hours, Josh tried to imagine her sitting next to him. *Grace? I... I know I'm being a total jerk, but I can't let anyone get close to me ever again.* he spoke his thoughts to the universe. *Everything ends... and friendship quickest of all. Even yours. I know you didn't want to go, but neither did Jenn. So now I'm left here all alone and I won't let anyone else I care about get hurt like that ever again!*

When lunch ended, Josh repeated the morning procedure with his afternoon classes. After the bell rang and he started his walk home, he heard someone running up behind him. His fury pressed to its limits, he spun around and turned his ire toward whoever it was that was about to confront him.

"*Jocelyn!*" David shouted running up to him. "Trace just told me you bit her head off at lunch! She's a total *wreck!* What did you *say* to her?"

His adrenaline pumping, Josh let his anger loose. "I told her the *truth*, Dave! That she's a total *bitch* and so are *you!* I don't need *anyone's* pity, least of all *yours!* You blew me off *years* ago! You *both* did! Now it's *my* turn! *Blow, jerk-wad!* You had *years* to apologize for dumping me as your friend! Now you feel *bad* about it? *Tough shit!* It's too late! Grace is *dead* and as far as *you're* concerned, so am *I!* Don't ever talk to me *again!*"

Turning to storm off, he felt David grab his arm to stop him. Whipping around, Josh slapped him hard across the face, making David let him go. "Don't you *ever* touch me again, *faggot!*" he screamed.

The sixteen-year-old boy was stunned. He was mad at Josh for yelling at his sister, but he'd been willing to listen to Josh's side. The violence and hatred flashing in his ex-friend's eyes was beyond reason; beyond reach. Backing away with his hand covering the sting on his cheek, David watched as Josh turned and stalked away from him.

Spending all his free time doing makeup work, Josh's life was reduced to school, sleep, and the meals his parents insisted he eat. The only exception was the four hours Josh took each Sunday to walk to Grace's grave, clean it, tell her he loved her, that he'd see her soon, and walk home. All else was just existence. By the last day of May, he'd finally caught up with all of his schoolwork just in time for finals and the end of the school year.

No one tried talking to him after that first day back. Once he was an outcast, but between the two outbursts at lunch and the one after school, over half the student body had personally seen his fury. None of them wanted Josh's righteous anger pointed at them.

The Sunday after school let out, as Josh got home from the cemetery, Fred caught him before he ran upstairs.

"*Jocelyn!* Could you come here a moment?" His voice was only mildly harsh when he said Josh's loathed name.

Turning around halfway up the stairs, Josh put a hand on one hip and cocked his head to one side. "*What?*"

"A call came for you while you were out." he stated. "It was a Mr. *Roberts*. I think I remember him coming to the hospital to see you before you woke up. He said he was your councilor, but Caller ID said it was from a *church!*"

"Oh, *him*." Josh spat. "I'll see to it that he never calls again! I'll be up in my room." Just as Fred was going to ask more questions, Josh ran up the rest of the stairs, slammed his bedroom door, and locked it.

Melanie came out of the master bedroom and looked up the stairs before turning to Fred. "What was *that* all about?"

Her husband just kept looking up to the landing where Josh disappeared. "I don't know, Mel... but I don't *like* it."

Shaking her head, she turned away. "We just need to let her work through it. We don't want to *push* her. She's very fragile right now. She needs time to work through the pain and re-center on her *own* self-identity." Heading back to her room, Melanie's voice faded as she went. "It'll be *good* for her in the long run, losing Grace. She was *far* too dependent on that conservative of a girl. Women *need* their independence or they lose their options..."

Josh lay on his bed and read the first prescription bottle. The one hundred milligram Phenobarbital tablets had a two-fold purpose; they helped prevent a relapse of his seizures and acted as a sedative to help him get to sleep at night. He was supposed to take one per day just before bed until all twenty were gone, but he'd not taken any since leaving the hospital.

Putting it down, he picked up the second. The Fioricet was to help with the headaches, but he was warned not to take any after two in the afternoon to minimize drug interactions and only as necessary. His doctor didn't like giving Josh the two drugs together, but felt the risks were lower than if he'd given him a stronger pain reliever. He'd taken only two, enduring the pain and sleeplessness, and still had a nearly full bottle of forty tablets. As far as his parents knew, they were all gone. He made sure that's what they believed, and had years of practice making them believe what they wanted of him.

The pain he could handle. It was nothing compared to the pain of the empty shell his heart had become. The sleeplessness he actually preferred over the

nightmares he suffered when he'd been made to take the Phenobarbital in the hospital. Half the time they were horrifying concoctions of half-remembered scenes of the accident. The rest he dreamed that he was trapped in a car at night while it sat on railroad tracks; Grace sitting next to him and smiling, blissfully unaware of the lights from the train racing at them and the blaring of its horn. That is, until it struck them with the force of an atomic bomb.

Sitting up, he placed the two bottles on his nightstand and got out of bed. Plopping down at his vanity, he pulled out his laptop and began to write, taking half a day to re-write, tweak, fix, add, and get his letter perfect.

To Whomever Gives A Shit,

My name is Joshua Vincent Ryan. NOT Jocelyn Viola! I AM A BOY! My father, Fred Ryan, is a weak-willed IDIOT. My mother, Dr. Melanie Ryan, is a sadistic WITCH. From the time I was 5 until the age of 12, they kept telling me I was gay. I knew what gay meant. I had a best friend that was gay named David Edwards. I knew I had no interest in boys, and by the time I was 9 I actually started liking girls... but my idiot parents just told me I was just REPRESSING being gay, sent me to LGBT summer camps, and refused to listen to me. Tracy and David Edwards can confirm all this.

They first forced me to start wearing girl clothes in September of 2005 when I was 12 years old. That's when they told me I was supposedly a transgender GIRL! I told my parents REPEATEDLY that I was a boy, but they refused to listen. OK, so I did some girly things. So what? That didn't make me a girl any more than them making me put on a dress did. They signed me up for Middle School as a transgendered girl and took away all my boy clothes. I had ZERO choice in it all.

There was a girl at school that understood me. Jennifer and her parents tried to help. Since I was 12, I just did what the grown-ups said I should do. My asshole parents then proceeded to TRAUMATIZE both me and Jenn so badly that Jenn tried to KILL herself. They're THAT bad! My

mother tricked me into getting castrated when I was 14. After that I gave up fighting it. No one would listen and it was too late to undo anything.

Then, miracle of miracles, I met another girl who understood me. Her name was Grace Wright. We were just friends for a while, but I knew she liked me as more than a friend. She didn't care if I was a boy or a girl... she just liked ME. Eventually we started to date and on her 16th birthday we professed our love for one another. We were going to be married and have a family. She was everything to me; my reason to live.

Now I've lost her and I have nothing to look forward to except a future trapped in a body I hate, with a name I loathe, and am expected to just pretend everything is sunshine and rainbow flags! I could wait 8 months until I'm 18 and then tell my parents where to go, but I don't care about getting away from them anymore. Now I just want to get away from ME and what my parents made me become because they WOULDN'T LISTEN. It's sad, really. If I HAD been transgender, my life would have been a dream come true. But I'm not, so it's a NIGHTMARE.

My parents USED me because it made them look good with their liberal friends and they had a political axe to grind. They wanted something they could shove in conservative faces and say "Look! You're MEAN and HATEFUL because you hate this little girl!" Even when the love of my life was killed by a drunk driver, they went out of their way to make a point that she was my 'lesbian girlfriend' and I was 'trans'. Any way you look at it, that's just wrong! Using my pain to further their cause! I HATE them!

So my only option left is death... or torture and THEN death. Death will come to me eventually anyway; I'm just cutting out the long, torturous time waiting for it to *GET* here. EVERYTHING ends. EVERYBODY dies. So what difference does it make now or later? I've been secretly going to church for 5 years now. It HAD to be a secret because my atheist parents are psychopaths who hate Christians over a fucking difference of theological opinion that neither side can ever prove anyway!

I'm an agnostic... I keep an open mind, just not so open that my brains fall out. So why did an agnostic 'T-girl' who was secretly still a boy go to church? Because I MET them... and they were NICE to me. Yes, they treated me as a girl, but EVERYBODY did that. I liked that they believed in something they couldn't prove, just like I couldn't prove I was always a boy. I also found a quiet beauty in spending time with people who hardly ever spent that time bitching about this, that, or the other thing! Yes, there were a few bad apples, but the most of them were just nice to be around. My pastor most especially.

I'm sorry, Pastor. I know you think suicide is a sin, but I can't live this life one more minute without hope... and my hope died when my Grace died. If God is real, I can only hope that he understands my agony and forgives me. It's all you're counting on too... so I don't see the difference.

Judy? I've never forgiven myself for Grace's death and I never will. I know you tried to make me feel better, but I know that she's dead because she was in a hurry to take me home and make love to me on our Prom night. If not for that, we would have never been hit by that idiot. It IS my fault. Now I'll join her. It wasn't fair that I got to live and she had to die. It would have been better if I'd died with her. Half of me DID die that night. I'm just finishing the job.

To my parents? FUCK OFF. I'm just another 'Trans' suicide statistic now. I know you'll just use my death to push for 'gender rights' even harder... claiming I was bullied by 'those evil Christians' until I killed myself. Lie to everyone else if you like, but know the truth: those 'evil' Christians were one of only two things that kept this from happening YEARS ago! Unfortunately, without Grace, going to church isn't enough to save me. (Funny, that works for actual Christians, too!) I truly hope you are devastated by this and HATE yourselves for what you did to me. I want you to suffer as much as you made ME suffer. Unfortunately, you're too fucking selfish to even care. If either of you have a decent bone in your body, you'll bury me in what I'm wearing with a headstone showing my birth name and, if Judy will allow it, next to my Grace.

To Tracy and David, I once loved you better than family. Then, when I needed you most, you threw me under the bus and abandoned me. I forgive you, even if you don't deserve it. I suppose I can understand. You had your own problems. Mine are too much for anyone, even me. So I'm sorry for the things I said when I came back to school. I just hurt so much that I wanted others to hurt too, and I also wanted to keep you away. Everyone I ever cared about or who cared about me gets hurt, so maybe you can understand. It was wrong. I was wrong. I love you both.

It's time. By the time anyone reads this, I'll be long gone. I know it sounds cliché, but it works because it's true. If anyone finds me and I'm not dead yet, please just let me die. I should have died in that accident with Grace. Now I can finally join her.

Examining and re-reading the letter, Josh saved it for sending on the schedule that he'd set to go to the local police, Pastor Roberts, Judy, and Tracy at two in the morning. He didn't bother sending one to his parents since he knew his father read his email anyway.

He stripped naked and got out the boy clothes he'd kept hidden in his closet behind his old pink robe. Getting dressed and stuffing his hair in the cap, he took a last look at himself. *I still look like a girl in boy clothes.* he shuddered. *Worse, I look like a young woman in boy's clothes!* Accepting that he couldn't improve on his appearance, he went over to his nightstand and opened the bottle of Phenobarbital and laid out all the tablets.

He knew he didn't have enough to ensure his death, two grams being barely adequate, but taken in combination with at least half of the Fioricet, the interaction of both should do the job. Having read the warning labels as a set of instructions, he knew that if he took them all at once he might throw up, so he started by taking one and waiting on his bed for thirty minutes. While he waited, he pulled out the old shoebox that contained all of the letters that Jennifer had given him and read them all, finally understanding the utter hopelessness written in her last letter.

When he felt the effects begin to kick in, that woozy feeling he hated, he took eight more and five Fioricet. Waiting ten minutes, he took the rest of the Phenobarbital and five more Fioricet. Feeling very drowsy, he knew he needed another ten painkillers to finish the job and he wanted to wait ten more minutes to take them. Getting up, he paced his room, looked at his posters, and enjoyed feeling like a boy again.

When he felt he couldn't stay awake any longer, he shuffled towards his bed. *This is it.* he accepted. *I'll just lay down, fall asleep, and never wake up.* Thinking of Grace, remembering her smile and the feel of her hand in his, he smiled and hummed *'There's a Place for Us'* to himself as he slowly sat on his bed. "Wait for me, Grace." he said with a tear. "I'm *coming*." He took two of the last ten tablets, one at a time, before blackness took him.

Some time later, Melanie and Fred were awoken by a loud knocking. After a moment, Fred started to rouse.

"Someone's at the door." he yawned, kicking the covers off. While he made his way to the front door, Melanie put on a robe. The knocking became more urgent before he shouted out, "I'm *coming*!" Opening the door, he saw two uniformed policemen with an ambulance crew standing behind them at the ready. "What's going on?"

"Is this the *Ryan* residence?" Officer Kyle Nelson, the policeman on the left, asked.

"*Yes*." he said hesitantly. "What *about* it?"

"Who *is* it, Fred?" Melanie asked as she came up to join him.

"*Cops*." Fred grouched. "They woke us up in the middle of the night to ask who we were!"

"Mister *Ryan*?" the policeman stated impatiently, "May we come in?"

"You got a *warrant*?" Fred spat at him. "If not then you can get the hell off my property!"

"We have a report of a possible suicide at this address by a... Joshua Ryan." the man said as he looked at his notepad. "Does he live at this address?"

"*Her* name is *Jocelyn* Ryan!" Melanie spat at him. "You *pigs* are so..." Pausing as it dawned on her what he'd said, she did a double take. "Did you say *suicide*?" Quickly, she and Fred looked at one another in horror.

"*Jocelyn!*" they screamed together as both ran for the stairway. Even as they ran up the stairs, the police and EMS crew, now knowing they had the right place, entered uninvited on the grounds of exigent circumstances.

Reaching Josh's door, Fred found it locked. Terrified, he slammed his body against the door to no avail. It refused to open. "Stupid lock!" he yelled as he tried again and again until Kyle reached them.

"Is he in here?" Kyle asked. Seeing Fred nod, even as Melanie screamed at him for 'misgendering' Josh, the officer made them move into the bathroom and kicked the door in, sending a shower of wood splinters into the room. Charging in, hand on his weapon in case Josh had a gun for his suicide, he saw a boy laying face down on the bed in a pool of his own vomit. "*In here!*" he shouted as he raced up to Josh.

While Fred and Melanie tried to push their way in, the second officer held them in the bathroom to give the EMS crew access.

"Get out of my way!" Fred tried to push past him.

"*Sir!*" Officer King shouted. "Let the EMS crew handle this! You'll just get in their way, slow them down, and you might kill your son!"

"*Daughter!*" Melanie shouted as she tried to get past him as well. "You stupid fascist *pig!* We have a *daughter!* Who said you could come in our home! *Get out! Jocelyn!*"

Officer Nelson turned Josh over and felt for a pulse, but found none. Looking at the boy, his face covered in very recent vomit, he looked like a typical teenage boy, even though the room was decidedly feminine. That is, until the cap fell off Josh's head when he moved him to the floor. Suddenly the vaguely plain 'boy' resolved into a definite girl.

The EMS crew entered and began CPR immediately, not even knowing yet if Josh was already dead. Kyle assisted them while Officer King held back his wailing parents. He hated rolling up to see a kid like this. It terrified him as he thought each one was just like one of his own children. Doing chest compressions, the ace bandage restraining Josh's breasts not making it any easier, a moment later one of the EMS crew cut it off with a pair of scissors. Not even thinking, Kyle placed the heel of his hand between Josh's breasts and resumed compressions as the other EMS member prepared a breathing tube.

A few minutes later, they had Josh in the ambulance and began racing to the nearest hospital while one of the crew kept up chest compressions and the other forced air into his lungs. Kyle was exhausted from the effort as he watched the vehicle race away, but hoped he'd made a difference that night.

Chapter 24 - Thoughts from the Graveyard

Floating in a dream state, Joss wondered if this was what death was, an endless sea of nothingness for all eternity.

"Of *course* it isn't!" she answered.

Wanting to turn to the source of the voice, Joss was frustrated by the lack of everything, including a body to turn around.

"It's *OK*, Joss." she said kindly. "Don't be *scared*."

He knew the voice well. "*Grace!*" he screamed frustratedly.

"I'm right *here!*" she groaned. "You don't need to *yell!*"

"Where *are* you?" *Where am I?* he wondered.

"Nowhere special." she answered both questions. "Just a place where we can talk." her voice turning sad, she sighed. "Why'd you give up, Joss?"

Wanting to cry, he felt the sadness cover him like a blanket, threatening to smother him. "You... you *died*. I was *alone* and it... it *hurt* too much to keep going!"

"You weren't *alone*, Joss!" Grace said with a hint of irritation. "You can't lie to *me!* Even if you lie to *yourself*, I can *see* you! *Mom* was there, and Tracy and David, Karen and Lucy, Pastor Roberts, even Officer *Nelson*."

"*Who?*" he asked curiously.

"The policeman who *found* you." she huffed as though it were the most obvious thing in the world. "You *scared* him, Joss! That wasn't very *nice* of you! Just think how *sad* all those people will be if you *die!*"

"*Sorry.*" he grumbled. "I guess I didn't think about the poor guy that would find me, how it would make *him* feel." A feeling of warmth pushed away his sadness, flowing through him. He didn't need to ask what it was. The feeling was the same when Grace hugged him. "*Thanks, Grace. I... I miss you!*"

"I miss you *too.*" she stated somberly. "It's OK, though! It *had* to be this way. If Peter hadn't hit us, I'd of died in a year *anyway* from cancer, and a year from now would be too late for *you*. Given the choice, at least *this* way didn't hurt. I didn't know what happened 'til I was *here*. Also *Peter* will be different. He won't kill those little kids two years from now. *He* explained it all to me."

"*Who?*" Joss asked again.

Giggling, he could hear the smile in her voice. "*Him!* Or *Her*. Neither one really works. He's not a man *or* woman, He just *is*. I only said 'He' out of habit, I guess."

"You mean... *God?*" he said tentatively.

"I didn't mean *Santa Claus!*" Grace laughed. "We've got it all *wrong*, Joss! He's not like *anything* we ever imagined!"

"Where *is* He? I mean, I'm *dead*. Shouldn't I be seeing Him or something?"

"You're not dead *yet!* Besides, He's *everywhere*, Joss! He always *was!* He's in *everything!* *Everywhere* and every *time...* all at *once!* He's *so beautiful!*"

"Then where *is* He?" he wondered aloud.

"He's a bit *miffed* at you at the moment." Grace chided him. "He *knew* you were going to do this, but that doesn't mean He had to *like* it."

"*Oh.*" Joss said simply. "So... am I going to *Hell* then?"

"Only if you die... and only if you send *yourself*." Grace answered. "*He* doesn't condemn us to Hell, we can only do it to *ourselves*." she explained.

"Why would anyone condemn *themselves* to Hell?" he mostly asked himself.

"*Guilt*." she answered sadly. "He shows you what He had in mind for your life. Then you get to see all the *evil* you did by not doing what you *should* have done and how much *better* everything could have been if you'd done it. I *should* have been easier on my Mom, and there was a kid in my old school, *remember*? That girl I told you about that didn't look very girly? I *should* have been *nicer* to her. She *could* have had a better life if I had been. Now..." Her voice trailed off as a feeling of remorse washed over Joss.

"How were *you* supposed to know?" he asked irritatedly. "I mean, if He has all these plans for us, why keep it a *secret*? Why not *tell* us what we're supposed to do? Isn't that a little *mean*?"

"I *knew*." Grace said guiltily. "I felt it in my *heart* when I said mean things about her behind her back. Just like *you* knew when you told off Tracy and David that it was wrong. We *always* know... we just *ignore* it."

"*Still*, He doesn't have to point it *out*, does He?" Joss debated. "I mean, it's too late to *fix* it. Why rub it in?"

"It's just how it *works*." she answered. "*You'll* see. Then it'll make sense."

"So, *when*?" he wondered. "How long do I stay here?"

"Until it's decided." Grace answered cryptically. "Now, don't give me any of *that*!" she laughed. "You *always* do that when you don't like the answer!"

"Do *what*?" he asked honestly. "What'd I *do*?"

"Roll your eyes at me!"

I have eyes? he wondered to himself.

"You can *see*, can't you?"

"*No...* well, not *really*. It's just *black*. *Nothing*. But I can sorta *see* it."

"*Oh.*" Grace said disappointedly. "I guess you're *punishing* yourself. That explains a lot. I hope you learn to *forgive* yourself."

"So... you can see me?" he hoped.

"Of *course* I can!" she insisted. "You're *so* beautiful! Just like always!"

Pausing a moment, he had to know the answer. "*Grace?* Am I... do I look like a boy or a girl?"

"Same thing I *always* tell you, Joss! You're *you!*"

"That's not really an *answer*, Grace!" he groused.

"Well, it's the only one that *works*." she stated matter-of-factly. "You're *you...* my wonderful *Joss!*"

Feeling the warmth of her hug again, Joss suddenly felt it vanish and grew cold. "What's happening?" he asked fearfully.

"It's been determined. Doctor Hicks did everything *right*, and you *didn't*."

"What do you mean?" he asked curiously.

"You *took* too long to get your letter just right." she explained. "It was one in the morning when you took your first pill. You just didn't notice. Still, it was kind of up in the air. Doctor Hicks *could* have chosen to give up on you after the third time, but he *didn't*. You're going back."

"No!" he yelled. "Grace, *please!* I don't *want* to! I want to stay here with you! I have *nothing* back there without you!"

"You *have* to, Joss." she pointed out unhappily. "I miss you *too*, but you're not *done* yet. That's why a year from now would have been... *Oh!*"

"What?" he asked, wondering what it was that surprised her.

"Um... He's *here!* He doesn't *usually* come here. This is the place He chooses *not* to be to let people understand on their own, or with help if anyone is willing, like me! That's my job! I'm a Helper, just like Daddy is! *He* wanted to be your Helper so you'd get a chance to meet him like you always wanted to, but I insisted! He could *never* say no to me!" she giggled.

Confused, Joss began to feel an overwhelming sense of love and compassion, one so big it drowned out everything else. Slowly the darkness began to fade into gray warmth, then white brilliance, and finally into a dazzling light brighter than anything he could ever have imagined. There, standing in front of him, was Grace as he remembered her best, the fourteen-year-old girl with the pixie haircut and exuberant attitude.

"Grace!" he smiled.

"No." she said with an ethereal voice that echoed with billions of voices in perfect harmony. "*She is here. She is with Me.*" The feeling of love pushed through Joss like waves of water, penetrating every part of his being. "*She has done what she needed to do, to help you see.*" Even as the waves of love emanating from Grace's form suffused his very soul, a terrible feeling of dread overwhelmed him. "*Do not throw away My gift again!*" The voices were all raised as if in anger, but felt more like frustration and irritation.

Overcome, Joss had to look away from the blinding brilliance as guilt filled him, only to be pushed away by the unending tide of love and compassion.

Hearing the voices soften again, Joss turned to face Grace once more. "*I gave you a rare gift. You know what to do with it.*" the voices echoed.

"Bye Joss." Grace said in her own voice. "I'll *miss* you, but I better not see you here *too* soon or I'll *thump* ya'!" she giggled. "Just follow your *heart*..."

Joss's eyes fluttered open. Once more he was in a hospital room, only this time he was alone. Trying to sit up, he found himself restrained as before, but with straps holding his wrists. Glancing around, he saw a small remote next to his hand with a single button on it, a line-art icon of a traditional nurse's cap decorating it. Picking it up, Joss pressed the button and waited.

Within a minute, he heard footsteps approaching. Turning his head, he saw a woman in her forties walking up to him.

"*Afternoon.*" she stated professionally, looking at his chart. "I'm *Carolyn*. Is it *Joshua* or *Jocelyn*?" she asked without prejudice, Joss noting that her voice had a bit of a British accent to it.

Croaking a whisper, he felt like someone had punched him in the throat. "You can call me Joss." he managed to eke out.

"Joss it *is*, then." she said with a half-hearted smile. Checking the machine next to him that was monitoring his vitals, she noted the readings before sitting on the corner of his bed. "Want some water?"

He nodded and watched as the woman brought him a cup with a straw, letting him sip a few drops before taking it away.

"Not *too* much." she said in warning. "Your body's been through the *wars*!"

Nodding in understanding, he tried to clear his throat, regretting it almost immediately as the pain nearly overpowered him.

"Easy, love!" the woman admonished gently. "Don't *push*. Try and go *slow*."

Swallowing and enduring the pain, he tried again. "Where *am* I?" he asked in a gravelly voice.

Sighing, she looked at him with pity. "You're in the psychiatric observation ward at Southwest General. You remember what happened, Joss?"

Guiltily, he turned away from her. "I.. I did something *stupid* I wish I could take back." his voice starting to sound normal after painfully clearing his throat again.

Smiling at him sympathetically, the nurse stood up. "Well that's a good *start*, anyway." she offered. "Need anything *else*?"

Looking down at the restraints, he looked up at her pleadingly. "Do these have to stay on?"

"Sorry, love." she shrugged.

"Another sip of water then, *please*?"

Giving it to him, Carolyn smiled down at him compassionately. "You're quite the *pretty* young thing, Joss... if you don't mind my *saying* so." she said softly. "For someone like you, it must be a nice... a rare gift."

Her words ran his memory back to the half-remembered dream he'd awoken from, suddenly not sure if it was a dream or not. "Like *me*?" he asked.

"Your chart says you're transgender... undergoing *hormone* therapy? There's a note that says you were having second thoughts though, so I wasn't sure how to address you. That's why I asked. I was just pointing out that a lot of girls like you could be so lucky to look so pretty... a rare gift. Hope you don't *mind*, love."

Shaking his head, he leaned up to get another sip. Swallowing it carefully, he was pleased that it didn't hurt so much this time. "*Thanks*, and no... I don't mind. I *know* I'm pretty. That's part of the *problem*."

Putting the cup on his rolling tray, she smiled at him and shook her head. "I have to get back now. You be *alright*?" Seeing him nod, she turned and walked out of his room.

Nearly an hour passed before he heard footsteps once more. "Glad to see you awake... *Joss*." a man said consulting the nurse's notes.

Looking over at who had come in, Joss knew at once he was a doctor just by his bearing, even though he wore business clothes. "I'm Doctor Benson. Mind if I ask you a few questions?"

Shaking his head, Joss tried smiling at him. "It's *fine*, doctor." he answered, disheartened a little that his name wasn't Hicks. *Guess it was all just a dream after all*. he admitted his disappointment inwardly.

Pulling up a chair and sitting next to the bed, the man regarded him earnestly. "You seem *sad*."

Taking a breath, Joss glanced at him again. "Just regretting being *stupid*." he half-lied. He did regret trying to kill himself, but was honestly more sad that his time with Grace was nothing but a fantasy.

"How were you stupid, Joss?"

"Trying to kill myself. I... I wish I could take it back."

Arching his brows at the boy's unexpected response, he looked over Joss's charts once more. "You wish you hadn't *tried*, or you wish you'd done it a different *way*?"

"Hadn't *tried*. I... I..." Joss shook his head. Concluding who it was he was talking to, he tried to encapsulate into words what he was feeling. The power of compassion and love that he'd felt in his dream made him realize just how much he'd nearly lost, but he didn't want to tell Doctor Benson about it for fear that he'd be locked up for thinking he'd met God. "I guess I just realized when I woke up that it was a stupid thing to do. Trying to kill myself, I mean. I shoulda *known* better. My friend Jennifer tried, too."

Shifting in his seat, Dr. Emanuel Benson regarded Joss curiously. "That's quite an unusual attitude for someone who just found out they *failed*," he commented. "Normally, the first response is regret that they didn't *succeed*. What changed your mind?"

Shrugging absently, Joss turned away from him. "I feel *awful*!"

Chuckling, the doctor noted it and looked back at Joss. "If you would have succeeded, you *wouldn't* feel awful. You wouldn't feel *anything*. Wasn't that why you did it? To make the pain stop?"

Nodding, he looked back at the man. "Yeah, but there were *other* ways to deal with it. I *knew* that, but killing myself seemed like the *easiest* way." Seeing Dr. Benson scratching some notes, Joss recognized the behavior. "You're a psychiatrist, *aren't* you?"

"Yes," he admitted. "I figured it wouldn't take you long to determine, your mother being a psychologist and all. Normally, I try and talk to my patients a while before I let them know. People get intimidated when they know that they're talking to a psychiatrist, but not you. Why *is* that?"

Noting his technique, Joss giggled. "I see what you *did* there! I know the routine... *that's* why, Doctor Benson. You ask questions meant to get through people's defenses. I'm not saying it's *bad* or anything, I just know the deal. Inside information, and all."

Jotting down more notes, he looked back up at Joss. "Alright then, Joss... *you're* being direct, so I will as well. Are you transgendered?"

Grimacing, Joss knew the doctor would ask, but hadn't yet figured out how to answer. "I don't *know*, doc." he said honestly. "I mean, I'm not *dysphoric*, if that's what you mean. I *liked* being a boy, but as to being trans? I just don't know. Being a girl is just *easier*."

"Because of how your parents treat you?" he asked.

"*Yes...* well, that and it sorta comes naturally, I guess." he admitted. "I've *always* been kinda girly. That's why my parents thought I was gay when I was little." He couldn't keep the derision out of his voice as he answered.

"You don't like your parents very much, *do* you?"

"Not really, no. I mean, I *love* 'em, but they think they know me better than *I* do. They would never listen when I told them how I felt."

"Parents are supposed to know their children." the doctor pointed out. "They have the advantage of better judgement and more perspective."

"But as was pointed out to me once, every child is a unique person." Joss countered. "We aren't clones of our parents. *Their* experience and judgement isn't necessarily appropriate to *our* situations. That's why they should actually *listen* and take the *kid's* perspective into account. Anyway, most of parenting is just educated guesswork and hoping you didn't mess up."

Furrowing his brow, he grinned weakly. "Where'd you hear *that*?"

Smiling at the memory of his time with the Healys and the sage advice from John, he sighed fondly. "The best source available, a loving parent. *Not* one of *mine*." he added harshly.

Taking notes, he looked up at Joss. "You seem to be an emotionally healthy person... maybe more so than average. So why did you want to *die*?"

"Did you read my letter?" Joss asked, knowing he would have. Seeing the man nod, he turned away embarrassedly. "It's pretty much all there. I wanted to escape what my parents turned me into." Gesturing to himself with his restrained hands, he glanced back up at him. "From this *body*... from the constant reminders that I look, sound, write, and probably *eat* like a girl!"

"How does a girl eat that's different from a boy?"

Rolling his eyes that the man took the statement seriously, Joss looked away. "That was a *joke*."

"Do you think this is a good time for *jokes*, Joss?"

"*Sorry*." he apologized sincerely. "Bad habit. Guess it comes from *being* a joke. The boy who looks and acts like a girl, but feels like a boy."

"Do you always talk so badly about yourself being transgendered?"

"Only since my parents forced me to *become* a joke."

"You think being transgendered is a *joke*?" the older man asked.

"It is if you *aren't*!" Joss snapped back. Forcing himself to calm down, he took a breath. "*Sorry*. But I will *not* be shoved down *that* road."

"What road is *that*?"

"The one where you back me into a corner, *forcing* me to say that there's nothing wrong with me being trans!" he nearly growled. "Because there *is* something wrong with it! I'm *not*! I have nothing against trans people! I just don't happen to *be* one! I'm not Natalie Wood, either! Sure, there'd be nothing

bad about it if I *was*, other than the fact that she's *dead*, but if people tried to treat me like I *was* her, that *would* be a problem!"

Making more notes, the doctor's eyes darted back toward Joss. "Do you think you're in a good enough place to even *make* that determination?"

Joss sat up as much as possible in the restraints and stared him directly in the eyes, unwaveringly. "*Nobody* gets to decide who I am, except *me*."

Pursing his lips, Dr. Benson noted something down before looking back up at him. Examining Joss carefully, he smiled. "That's an excellent answer, Joss. Just so you know, I only wanted to see how you would react to me trying to tell you who you are. I'm glad to see that you won't let someone do that to you."

"Not *anymore*." Joss stated coolly.

"That's a healthy attitude." the psychiatrist advised. "The willingness to fight to defend your identity shows your sense of self-preservation has re-asserted itself, reducing the probability that you'll attempt suicide again." Taking a few last notes, Dr. Benson stood up. "Well, I have some other people to see. It was a pleasure talking with you. I'll be back tomorrow."

As the man started to go, Joss had to ask. "Doctor Benson?" Seeing him turn back around, the boy sighed. "I'll understand if the answer is no, I mean, it's your butt if I were to try again, but..." He glanced down at the restraints. "Are these still necessary? I'd give you my word that I have no intention of hurting myself ever again, but I know that doesn't mean much to you. I wish Pastor Roberts was here. *He* could vouch for me."

Taking a breath, the barrel-chested psychiatrist looked at him seriously. "Joss, you're *right*. If I release you and you hurt yourself again, your parents could sue me for letting it happen."

"Then I guess it comes down to whether or not you'll take my word." Joss said, lying back down to stare up at the ceiling.

"I'd *like* to Joss." he said sadly. "I really *would*, but I just don't know you well enough to know if that *means* anything to you. You're also *very* adept at deception. You've been making people truly believe you're a girl for years when you say you aren't. That, on top of your mother's influence, you could know just what to say to me to *make* me believe you. I'm sorry. You don't realize how bad off you were when they brought you in. Given how much of what you took, it was a minor miracle that you *survived*. You might *not* have if Doctor Hicks hadn't been so *stubborn*."

Whipping his head around, Joss's eyes went wide. "What did you say?"

Perplexed, Emanuel Benson raised his eyebrows. "I was just saying that I don't know you well enough to tell..."

"*No!*" Joss interrupted him. "Doctor *who?*"

Gazing at the boy, his expression lightened. "*Oh!* Doctor *Hicks!* He's the emergency room physician that treated you when you first came in. He lost you three times, but he wouldn't give up. You wouldn't *be* here except for him." Looking at Joss concernedly he asked, "Are you *alright?*"

His face went ashen as he recalled the name Grace had told him. *I suppose I could have heard it on the operating table.* he tried to justify to himself, but the details were too startlingly accurate. "I... I'm *fine.*" he lied. "I... I just never owed someone my *life* before."

"You don't owe him *anything*, Joss." Dr. Benson advised skeptically. "He does it because he loves helping people. It's in his nature." His expression turning jovial, the man tried to help elevate Joss's mood. "Besides, it's your *parents* who owe him. They'll be getting his *bill* next month! See they *pay* it! He's got student loans to pay that saved your life!"

Left alone again, Joss pondered his revelation. *Was it real?* he wondered. *Or was it all just my brain taking in information and building an elaborate dream to fulfill my need to see Grace again? Then why couldn't I see her until the end when it wasn't her anymore?*

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but it eluded him for several hours.

He became aware of the fact that he must have dozed off when he looked up and saw the clock on the wall. It said it was a few minutes after nine, but without a window he didn't know if that was AM or PM. Lying back, he realized after a moment that he was very thirsty. Pressing the button on the remote again, this time a voice just came over a speaker.

"*Yes?*" the disembodied female voice asked.

"I'm thirsty." he stated simply. "Could someone get me some water, *please?*"

With a note of irritation the voice replied, "Someone will be in there shortly." followed by empty silence.

When the clock showed it was twenty minutes to ten, he considered pressing the button again. His thirst was agonizing; his throat hurting and his lips dry and cracking. Deciding to wait and find out if he'd been forgotten, it was a few minutes later when a woman finally came in looking very put out. Without saying a word, she picked up the cup of water and held it out in front of him impatiently.

Leaning forward in the restraints, Joss stretched himself to reach the straw, barely managing to put his lips on it and suck some of the refreshing liquid into his mouth. Holding it there a moment, he let it soak his lips and tongue before swallowing some. Not yet finished with his first drink, the woman put the cup down and started for the door at a brisk pace.

"*Wait!*" he begged, causing her to pause and look back at him scornfully. "Could I have *more*, please?"

Rolling her eyes, she stalked back to the bed and thrust the cup in front of him again. "*Here!*" she barked, the only word Joss ever heard her say.

Taking another drink, and certain that she'd walk off as soon as his lips left the straw, he took several gulps before filling his mouth with water until his cheeks bulged. As he predicted, the woman put the nearly empty cup down and left. He took several minutes to slowly let the water trickle down his throat, not wanting to run out too soon. After it was gone he felt better, but found he was wide-awake. He tried sleeping, but it wouldn't come. He lay there for countless idle hours with nothing to do but ponder his situation and listen to the electric hum of the clock on the wall.

When Carolyn came in the next morning, Joss snapped his eyes open, unsure when in the early hours of the morning he'd fallen asleep. Lifting his head, he smiled at her. "Good morning, Carolyn."

"*Mornin'*, love!" she chirped. "*Sleep* well?"

"Not *really*." he admitted. "Could I get some water, please?" Once more he found himself parched, despite the IV bag pouring fluids into him.

Refilling the cup, Carolyn sat on the edge of the bed. "*Here* we are. Let's sit you up so you don't choke!"

Raising the head of the bed helped immensely as Joss took the offered straw in his lips and sucked gently. Swallowing little sips, he felt safe she wouldn't walk away before he was done.

Looking at him as he finished, she pushed the bangs out of his eyes. "Have a good talk with Doc Benson, then?" she asked knowingly.

He nodded and relaxed. "Yeah. He seems *nice*. I think he can help me."

Getting up, she put the empty cup down before noting Joss's vitals on his chart. "He *is* nice... for a *trick cyclist*!"

"Sorry, *what*?" Joss looked at her with confusion.

"Slang for *psychiatrist*, love." she explained. "He cares about his patients, maybe *too* much... '*especially* young ones like yourself. He's *too* empathetic. He can look at you and just *know* how you feel. *Eerie* sometimes!"

Laughing together, Joss nodded. "I *noticed* that. He knew I was sad without me even saying a word."

"What were you sad about?" she asked.

Not wanting to lie like he had to Dr. Benson, he stared at her carefully. "Can I tell you a secret? One you *won't* put in your notes?"

Tilting her head, she looked at him askance. "I'm supposed to note anything you say, love... even you asking me to keep a secret."

Joss lay back, unwilling to risk getting labeled as a crackpot just to be honest. "Never mind. It's not important." he said disappointedly.

Wanting to help, Carolyn thought for a moment. "Tell you what, Joss. *You* tell me, and if I think it's not something the good Doctor needs to know, I *won't* note it. *That* fair?"

Deciding to trust her, he nodded and waited while she sat on his bed next to him again. "I was sad because I thought it was all a *dream*." Telling her what he'd experienced, he noted how he knew the name of the emergency room doctor and his tenacious attitude before Dr. Benson had told him. "I... I think it was *God*, Carolyn... but I'm afraid if Doctor *Benson* knows that's what I

think, he might think that I'm totally *insane*, lock me up, and throw away the *key!*"

Listening quietly, Carolyn took it all in understandingly. "It's alright, love." she comforted as she moved Joss's bangs out of his eyes gently once more. "I understand. I don't think he'd lock you *up*, though. Pro'lly just tell ya' it was only a dream, but *I* believe you!"

Looking at her a moment, Joss smiled. "*Thank* you, Carolyn." His expression turning concerned, he asked, "Are you gonna tell him?"

Sighing as she got up, she picked up his chart. "I *should*, but I think I'll leave it to *you*, love. *Tell* him. Bet you he already knows you're keeping something from him. You should learn to *trust* people. He wants to *help*. You said so *yourself!*"

Leaving him with those thoughts, he considered her words. By the time Dr. Benson came in that afternoon, he'd made up his mind.

"How are you feeling *today*, Joss?" Emanuel asked as he pulled up a chair.

"*Bored.*" he confessed. "And stiff from not being able to move, but I get it."

Noting it down, the man stood and unlatched Joss's restraints. "We'll see if they *stay* off, but for while I'm *here* at least, you can move a little. Just be careful of your IV and catheter."

Rubbing his wrists, Joss pushed himself up and felt his back pop. "*Ohhh!* That felt *so* good!" he moaned.

Chuckling a little as he sat back down, he reviewed the nurses' notes. Not seeing anything of interest, he went straight to the first question he had on his mind. "So how about we start with you telling me whatever it was you were *dodging* yesterday."

Turning away, Joss was embarrassed, but pressed forward. "I... I *lied* to you yesterday." he admitted. "When you asked why I was sad, I *lied*." Explaining about his experience, he finally got to his disappointment. "So, when you said your name was *Benson*, I thought it was all just a dream, but then you told me about Dr. *Hicks*. I already knew his name and about how hard he fought to save me. *Grace* told me."

Scribbling in a frenzy, Emanuel finally got it all down. "I can understand why you'd be afraid to admit all that Joss, but we don't lock people up for their *beliefs*. We lock them up for their own protection, or the protection of others. If *you* chose to believe that what you experienced was real, that's your choice. Now if you told me God said to try to kill yourself again or hurt *other* people, that would be *different*."

Relieved, Joss scooted over on his left side to face the man. "*Thanks!* I feel a little better now. I don't *like* lying to people. You're *right*. I do it too much already. I... I was just *scared*. Thanks for not thinking I'm *loony!*"

They spent the next hour talking about Joss's feelings of frustration, anger, and learned helplessness over the past five years. The tormented teen held nothing back. By the time Dr. Benson got up to leave, he watched as Joss moved to lay on his back once more and put his hands down at his sides.

"Do you *want* me to restrain you again, Joss?" he asked.

"*No.*" he answered. "But I'm not going to *fight* you over it. I understand."

Walking up, Emanuel smiled and put his hand on the boy's shoulder. "I *trust* you now, Joss. I don't think you'll hurt yourself ever again. Why don't we try leaving them *off* tonight and see what happens, alright?"

Joss smiled back at him. "Don't *worry!*" he chirped. "I think I'm gonna be just *fine!*"

Chapter 25 - "When in the Course of Human Events..."

The following day Dr. Benson talked with Joss for another two hours after his IV and catheter were removed. Sure that he understood his patient, he needed to see how he handled other people. On the afternoon of the fourth day of his observation, the first guest he allowed to see Joss was his father.

Following the psychiatrist into the room, Fred saw Joss and nearly cried. "*Princess!*"

"Don't *call* me that!" his son snapped, making the man stop in his tracks, dumbfounded. "You can call me *Joss*, Fred. That's *all*."

Furrowing his brow, he looked at Dr. Benson who said nothing and just scribbled some notes. "Um... but I've called you pr..."

"Not anymore." Joss interrupted him. "I'm *nobody's* princess! I'm not your sweetie, sweetheart, or *pumpkin*. I'm your *son*, Fred... and barely *that*."

Moving closer, the man tentatively sat in the chair beside the bed. "Alright... *Joss*. When did *this* happen?"

Joss stared at the oblivious man with disdain. "Since *always*, Fred! I've *always* been your son! You just refused to *hear* me when I *told* you!"

Swallowing hard, Fred shifted uneasily. "We know that you initially had difficulty accepting who you are, Joss..."

"You *still* aren't listening!" he said in a raised voice. Looking over at Dr. Benson, he forced himself to calm back down. "Fred, you aren't *listening*. I *never* had difficulty knowing myself. You and Melanie tried to *tell* me who I am." Turning again to his psychiatrist, he grimaced determinedly. "*Nobody* gets to decide who I am, except *me*."

Facing his father once more, he continued. "You thought I was gay for seven years and tried to *make* me be gay by trying to convince me it was true. The only reason I was able to fight you was because of Tracy and Dave. *They* kept me sane. *They both* knew I wasn't gay."

"*Look, Jocel... Joss.*" Fred tried to defend himself. "Your mother and I *know* we made some mistakes, but we realized what was wrong and tried to..."

"*No, Fred!*" he interrupted again. "You made the same mistake all *over* again! You tried to *tell* me who I was! You can't *do* that! *Nobody* can!" Calming himself again, he resumed. "You can't *tell* someone they're gay or trans and make it be *real*, Fred. I *never* wanted to be a girl. *You* did that to me without my consent and against my will."

"But you *admitted* you were trans!" he shot back. "The first day of Middle School when I had to pick you up!"

"*No, Fred!*" he corrected his father again. "You chose to *interpret* what I said to mean that, and I couldn't change your mind. All I wanted at that moment was to get home to call the girl I liked back then to make sure *she* didn't think I was trans. Turned out I was too late, but I was only *twelve*! At the *time*, I'd have told you the sky was *purple* if it meant I could have had a chance with Brenda!"

Fred considered the idea for a moment before pressing forward. "But what about all the *rest*? Calling me Daddy, your *clothes*, the way you laughed and talked, your best friend Tracy... you were a *girl*!"

"*No, Fred.*" Joss denied once more. "I *wasn't*. I liked doing some girly things and I *looked* more like a girl than a boy, but that didn't make me a girl. At worst it made me an effeminate *boy*... but I *was*, and still *am*, a *boy*! Just because a woman looks severe and manish doesn't make her any less of a woman, does it? So why did me looking like a girl make *me* one?"

"Forget your looks!" Fred batted the question aside. "You *act* like a girl!"

"That doesn't *make* me one, Fred." he pointed out. "A tomboy may like doing *boy* things and acting *boyish*, but that doesn't make her a *boy*!"

"Well that's just..." Fred stopped and thought about what Joss was saying. Guilt threatening to overwhelm him, his mind refused to accept the truth, that he'd forced his son to be a girl against his will. In complete denial, he shook his head. "*No!* No, you're a girl and that's *that*, Jocelyn!"

"*Joss.*" he retorted calmly.

"I'll call you what I like!" he shouted. "I'm your *father!* Joss is only short for Jocelyn, anyway!"

"Mister *Ryan?*" Dr. Benson chided him. "I'm going to have to ask you to *calm* yourself or I'll have you removed."

"*Try it!*" he snapped at the psychiatrist. "I'll just have Jocelyn moved to *another* facility where..."

"I'm afraid *not*, Mister Ryan." the doctor interrupted. "Joss is being held here under psychiatric observation per state law. He is under *my* custody until such time as *I* deem him not a threat to himself or others. He will *not* be moved."

"*She!*" Fred barked. "*Her* name is *Jocelyn!*"

"My name is *Joss.*" he stated stubbornly. "And I'm a *boy.* A *male.* A *he.*"

"You keep out of this, Jocelyn!" he shouted. "You don't know yourself! These quacks have warped your mind! They've twisted everything around to make you believe..."

His tirade was interrupted by a heavy hand on his shoulder. Turning around, he saw a black man the size of Mount Rushmore standing behind him wearing the uniform of a police officer.

"Mister *Ryan*?" he said in tones low enough to shake the floor. "I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to leave, sir. *Now*."

Cowed by his size, Fred swallowed hard and stammered his reply. "But... I'm her *father*!" he pointed at Joss.

"You may be *his* father Mr. Ryan," Officer Jesse Webber retorted, having heard Joss's denial of his femininity, "but you're disturbing the peace and if you *don't* leave, I'll have to place you under arrest. If you resist, I'll *tase* you. *Please* don't make me do that. It *always* makes a mess!"

Joss giggled at the imagery of the giant man tasing his father.

"*There!*" Fred pointed at Joss as he looked at Dr. Benson. "You *hear* that? That's a *girl's* laugh! She *talks* like a girl, she *acts* like a girl..."

"And yet," Dr. Benson stated plainly, "he's a *boy*. Figure *that*?"

"You just want to reverse her transition!" Fred shouted. "You think he's a boy because it says so on his *birth* certificate! The state won't *let* us change it!"

Answering calmly, Dr. Benson shook his head remorsefully. "If *Joss* told me he was a girl Mr. Ryan, and I listened to him and *believed* him, I'd say he was a girl, *regardless* of what it says in his birth certificate. He instead continues to *insist* he's a boy, and always *has* been, and I *believe* him... so that's what he *is*. And I'm sorry Mr. Ryan, but you *were* warned. Officer Webber?"

Fred felt his arms twisted behind his back and the handcuffs ratcheted around his wrists. "*No*..." he whimpered looking at Joss.

Watching his father being placed under arrest and handcuffed, Joss folded his arms across his ample chest with a look of sympathy on his face.

"I'm placing you under arrest for aggravated disorderly conduct, Mr. Ryan." Officer Webber went through his Miranda rights. "You have the right to remain *silent*. If you choose to shoot off your stupid mouth, anything you say *will* be used against you in court." Dragging the man bodily from the room, he continued to read him his rights. "You have a right to have an *attorney* tell you to shut the hell up, *too*."

Dr. Benson sighed and shook his head as he sat in the chair by Joss's bed. "I'm *sorry* about that, Joss." he apologized. "I see now what you've been putting up with all your life. I talked with him before he came in and he *seemed* perfectly reasonable, at least the *more* reasonable of your parents. Your mother was openly *hostile*. I won't make you endure that again if I don't *have* to, alright?"

Nodding, Joss looked at his hands in his lap. "I... I didn't want anything *bad* to happen to them, Doctor Benson. I just wanted it to *stop*."

"I'm sorry it took you nearly dying... *twice*... to get someone to *listen*." the man consoled him. "Are you up for more *pleasant* company?"

Curious, Joss looked at him. "*Who*?"

Dr. Benson stood up and started towards the door. "Let me bring her in." At that, he left as suddenly as he came.

Nervously, Joss sat on the bed and waited. Hearing footsteps coming, out of habit he wished that he had a mirror to check his appearance.

Stepping through the doorway, Judy saw him and let out a sigh at seeing him alive. "*Joss!*" she cried. Rushing over to him, she took him in her arms and cried. "I was so scared for you, honey! Don't you *ever* do that again!"

Relaxing into her warm embrace, he sighed contentedly. "I *won't*, Judy! I *promise!*" Holding each other a moment, Judy at last released him and took a step back. "*Judy?*" he began, "I... I saw *Grace*. She helped me."

Listening in utter disbelief, she heard him recount his time in Limbo with her daughter. When he told her about Dr. Hicks, she embraced him once more. "My *God*, Joss! I can hardly *believe* it!" Crying with him, the two separated after several minutes and Judy handed him a tissue, also taking one herself as they dried their eyes.

Talking for quite a while, the two relaxed into their comfortable familiarity, laughing and talking seriously about different things. Eventually, Dr. Benson had to interrupt them.

"Mrs. *Wright?*" he said sadly. "I'm afraid it's time."

Not wanting to leave, she turned to the doctor. "*Already? Do I have to go?*"

Emanuel gazed at her at her intently. "Mrs. *Wright*, you seem to care for Joss very deeply."

Turning back to the boy, she looked at him both happily and sadly. "He... he was going to be my... my *son-in-law*, Doctor. *Grace* *adored* him, and I learned *why*. He's *wonderful!*"

"He is remarkable." he noted before he took her aside. "Mrs. *Wright...*"

"*Please!*" she interrupted him. "Call me Judy!"

Pausing a moment, he nodded. "Alright... *Judy*. I was wondering how *much* you cared for him."

Not sure how to answer, she turned to Joss. "Well... I care for him as much as I did for my *Grace*. She... *sorry...* bad habit... *he* was going to be *family*."

To me, that *means* something. In my heart, he's been family since he and Grace fell in love. I guess he always *will* be, even now that she's gone."

Surprised at her own words, she looked away at nothing. "I... I didn't even *realize* it until just now. When... when Grace *died*, I never wanted to see him again. Then, all of a sudden, I couldn't let him be *alone*." She looked back at Dr. Benson. "What does that mean?"

He smiled at her compassionately. "It means that you love and miss your *daughter*, but you love Joss as your son no *less*." Pausing, he glanced at the girlish boy before turning back to her. "Judy, I'd like to talk to you privately before you go." Nodding to Joss he asked, "Would you excuse us, Joss?"

Giving their good-byes, Joss watched her leave with the doctor. When the psychiatrist came back in, the man looked at him sympathetically.

"Ready for more?" he asked happily. When Joss responded with a smile, he leaned out the door and waved someone forward.

Tracy and David came in with their parents Joyce and Hank, Tracy running up to Joss and throwing her arms around him, both beginning to cry.

"Oh, *Joss!*" she sobbed. "I didn't know it was so *terrible!* I'm *so* sorry!"

While the three others walked up, Hank seemed embarrassed as he looked around at everything other than Joss. "Um... *Joss?* The doctor said that's what you want to be called, right?" Pausing a moment as Joyce joined Tracy next to the boy he'd thought of as a girl for the last five years, he forced himself to turn to the apparent grown woman lying in the hospital bed. "We... we read the email you sent to Tracy. I can't *believe* your parents could be so *cruel*, so... *tyrannical*. I'm sorry that we couldn't help protect you."

At first Joyce tried to hold Joss to comfort him, but Tracy's tearful embrace made it impossible. Instead she just petted his head and held his free hand,

his other arm wrapped around Tracy as they sobbed together. "It's *alright*, Joss." she soothed. "It's *OK*, dear. We're *here* for you."

After a few minutes letting their emotions run their course, Tracy stepped back and rejoined David and her father as her mother slipped an arm around his shoulders. "Joss?" the girl had to know. "Is... is it true that you *never* wanted to be a girl? Not even a *little*?"

Shaking his head slowly and sadly, Joss repeated his truth. "*No*, Trace. Not even a *little*. It was all *them*. They didn't give me any *choice*."

"So, does that mean you're gonna want to start, like, going to *football* games and watching sports on TV?" she asked with a mildly disgusted look on her face. "I mean, if that's what you *want* to do, it's *fine*, but..."

"*Trace!*" he giggled, "I do the stuff I do because I *enjoy* it. Yeah, I like shopping, chatting for hours, and other *girly* stuff, but that never made me a *girl!* Is a tomboy really a boy just because she likes to do *boy* things?"

"Well *no*, but..." Tracy stopped even as she started. Thinking for a moment, she looked at Joss in a completely different way. "So, you're just a normal guy that looks like a girl and likes to do girl stuff? Um... a *Tomgirl?* Is that a *thing?*"

Getting a few chuckles from everyone, including Joss, Dr. Benson thought he should help at this point. "*Yes* Tracy, Joss is a boy, even though he looks like a girl and likes to do typically feminine things. He is because that's what he *feels* like, even though he's been made to go through female puberty. That fact means that Joss *is* transgendered now... a boy trapped in a mostly female body. Do you understand?"

"I *think* so." she sighed. "Joss... I'm *really* sorry! I feel like it's all my fault! You told me all this *years* ago, but I just thought..." Her voice trailed off as guilt choked her words.

"...you thought my parents were right, that I was hiding from being trans." Joss finished for her. "I *know*. It's OK. You were just a *kid*!"

Finally, the last one in the room who hadn't spoken yet stepped up to Joss's bedside. "Um... *Joss*?" David said in his baritone voice. "I... um... man you musta gone though hell *itself*, dude! If my folks tried to turn *me* into a girl? I woulda *lost* it!" Turning to his parents, he held up his hands in mock surrender. "Don't get me wrong! I know you *wouldn't*, I'm just *sayin'*!"

After a bit of laughter, David regarded Joss somberly. "Um... I guess I have more to apologize for than *Tracy*. At least she didn't turn on you for what *they* did to you like *I* did. I thought like, you were *lying* to me all those years growing up, ya' know? Hell, *I* knew you liked stupid *girly* stuff like Trace, but you were still a *guy*. When I thought that you'd just been pretending to be a guy, I got mad and never even gave you a chance to tell me what was really going on. That's all on *me*. I'm *sorry*, dude."

"*That's* OK, Dave." Joss smiled at him weakly. "I wasn't very nice to you, either. Or *you*, Trace." he said, turning to her. "I was upset because I felt *abandoned*. Then when Melanie... um... had me castrated and put on HRT, I blamed you guys for not being there to help me. So try not to feel *too* bad about it, OK?"

Reaching out, Joyce hugged him desperately on hearing him say that. "Oh, *Joss*! I feel just *awful*! I should have tried harder to find out what went wrong when you three had your falling out! I just thought that... well... that you *pushed* them away! I'm *sorry*, dear!"

After several more rounds of apologies and a little catching up, including telling them about his spiritual revelation, the four were shown out by Dr. Benson, who returned once again after several minutes.

"Are you up for one more?" he asked gently. "You *can* say no."

"That's alright, Doctor Benson." Joss said happily. "I'm *fine!*" A moment later, Joss wasn't so sure as Pastor Roberts came into his room.

Looking at one another a moment before he could speak, Daniel walked up to the child he'd known for five years as Jocelyn. "I understand you're going by the name *Joss* now." he began.

"If you don't mind, Pastor." he answered meekly. Turning away, he couldn't face the man.

"*Joss... I... Once again, I don't know what to say.*" the pastor stammered. "I *look* at you, and I see a girl... even though I *know* you're a boy. Now I come to learn that this was *done* to you? Against your *will*? By your own *parents*? Joss... why didn't you *tell* me? I could have *helped!*"

"*How?*" he asked as his wet eyes once more turned toward the man. "They didn't do anything *illegal*. They had a note from a psychiatrist. What could *you* have done? The last people that tried to help were the *Healys*. My parents responded by *literally* ripping Jennifer out of my arms, throwing them out, and banning me from ever seeing them again. *That's* why Jenn tried to kill herself. You think they'd of treated *you* better than a twelve-year-old *girl?*"

Processing what he was saying, he shook his head. "OK, I don't understand something. If you didn't *want* to be a girl, and your parents didn't know you were going to church, why did you come *dressed* as a girl?"

"I had nothing *else.*" he answered. "Should I have just not *gone?*"

"If you would have told me your problem, I would have *gotten* you boy's clothes!"

"And suddenly *Jocelyn* stops coming to church and Josh *starts* coming, but he looks just like *she* did, just in *boy* clothes." he argued. "The congregation isn't *stupid*, Pastor Roberts. That would have lasted about five *minutes* before

someone freaked out. Besides, I eventually *was* able to get some boy clothes, but I just looked like *Jocelyn* dressed sloppy. I... I look too much like a girl."

Shaking his head, Daniel wanted to refute the argument, but the logic was inescapable. "And even if I told the congregation your story, some would *still* have reacted badly... for *you*. They would have tried to interfere as the Healys did, tipping off your parents that you were attending church..."

"...and they would have forbid me to *go* anymore." Joss concluded. "You see? No good would come of it. I was *stuck*."

Daniel sat down in the chair by Joss's bed. "I'm surprised you *ever* came, given what you had to go through to *do* so. I... I read in your letter that you're *agnostic*. I know you said you liked the *people*, but I feel like I've failed you as a spiritual advisor if you *still* don't believe after so long."

"I believe *now*!" Joss smiled at him.

Looking at the boy, Daniel's eyes grew wide. "*What?* But you said..."

Going through the whole story again, Joss told him about his experience. "He said he gave me a rare gift and that I know what to do with it, but Pastor Roberts, I don't know what He *meant*! What gift do *I* have? I'm an OK artist, but nothing special. I once beat Heather Kent at jump rope when I was eight. The only other thing special about me is that I'm a boy that looks like a girl!"

Taking it all in, Daniel thought a moment before turning back to Joss. "You say He said you *knew* what to do?" Seeing Joss nod, the man got up and took the teen's hand. "Then you'll know what to do when the time comes. Hold on to that! You have *many* gifts! You're kind and compassionate, *especially* for someone who's been through what you have. Most boys forced into your situation would have become violently *hateful*. Just trust that you *are* special and have *many* gifts."

The hour getting on towards late afternoon, Dr. Benson had to cut the time short. "Pastor Roberts?" he began after he and Joss had said their good-byes, "Could I take a few minutes of your time in private before you leave?"

Going out in the hallway, they were gone several minutes before Dr. Benson came back in. Taking a seat next to Joss's bed, he looked at his patient sadly and seriously. "*Joss*, today is the last day of your observation. By law, I have to either release you or get a court order to have you committed to a state institution. Given everything I've seen, even if I *did* file commitment papers, they'd be denied. You're no danger to *anyone*, yourself included."

Joss turned away from his doctor glumly. "That means you're gonna have to give me over to *Melanie*, since you had Fred arrested. I'm sure she's gonna be pis... um... *angry*... about him getting thrown in jail. I'm guessing my trips to church are over, too."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about." Dr. Benson stated. "Joss, it's my belief that while not *technically* illegal, what your parents have done to you may constitute *mental* abuse under Ohio law. The trouble is, providing unwanted medical care to a minor has no precedence for being a form of abuse, and getting a court to agree that it is might be difficult. I think the *best* option would be to get your mother to *willingly* give up custody of you."

"Fat chance of *that!*" Joss snarked. "She sees me as her *trophy*, the ultimate expression of her *progressiveness*. How could anyone ever even *hope* to overcome *that?*"

Melanie walked down the hallway of the hospital with Dr. Benson just ahead of her. She was angry that she'd been denied access to Joss for four days after he woke up. Reading the note he'd left had sent her senses beyond reason. The very idea that Joss had been going to church of his own free will was beyond possibility. Somehow, somewhere, they'd gotten to her 'Jocelyn' and brainwashed 'her'. It was the only possibility she'd accept.

Convinced that the pastor and congregation of the church he was attending had driven him to deny being transgender and that *they* were responsible for his attempted suicide, she needed to get to him and start undoing the damage they'd done. That Dr. Benson wouldn't allow it infuriated her. That he denied Dr. Williams access as well *enraged* her. When he'd had Fred arrested for disorderly conduct, she was ready to snap.

To add insult to injury, she was forced to follow the man to Joss's room, simply because she had no idea where he was. To her mind, having to follow a man was the equal of foot-binding and being told that her place was in the home... cooking, cleaning, and making babies. The very large police officer following her was the only thing that kept her from saying anything.

When she entered the room, she stopped dead as a cold shiver ran down her spine. Joss was standing next to his bed wearing boy's jeans and sneakers, a man's flannel shirt, and a baseball cap; his long hair apparently gone and his breasts nowhere to be seen. "What the hell is *this*?" she demanded.

"Hello, Melanie." Joss said calmly.

"*Jocelyn!*" she yelled, only to be interrupted before she could say more.

"He prefers the name *Joss*, Mrs. Ryan." Dr. Benson stated truthfully.

"*Her* name is *Jocelyn!*" she shouted at him. "Don't you *dare* misgender her again! And it's *Ms.* Ryan, thank you!"

"*Actually* Melanie," Joss sighed, "Doctor Benson is *correct*... I prefer Joss. And *he* didn't misgender me, *you* did! I'm a *boy*. I always *was*."

Walking over to him, she watched as he fearfully moved around to the other side of the bed from her, making her stop and try to figure out how to get him to comply. "*Jocelyn*, sweetheart, you're just *confused*. Those religious extremists filled your head with hate and internalized transphobia! You're a

girl, Jocelyn! Now... you come out from behind that bed and let me take you home."

"No, Melanie." Joss shook his head. "Doctor Benson hasn't released me, so you *can't* take me home. First, I want to talk to you."

Biting her lip, she knew if she just waited, the psychiatrist would have to let Joss go or file to have him committed. Still, she wanted to get on Joss's good side so that once he was home she could get rid of the boy clothes and spend the summer deprogramming him. "*Alright*, sweetie."

"*Joss*. No more pet names, Melanie. I'm a seventeen-year-old boy and..."

"*Girl!*" she snapped at him.

"*Boy.*" he stated right back calmly.

"Ms. *Ryan*," Dr. Benson warned her, "I'll ask you not to shout at him again. You're disturbing the other patients."

"*Her!*" she barked at the doctor, unable to stop herself. Covering her mouth, she took a breath and glared at him. "*Fine*. I won't *shout*." Turning back to Joss, she looked at him gently. "Jocel... *Joss*... your father and I know you *hate* confrontation. You want to fit in. We *understand*, sw... *Joss*." she self-corrected. "But you can't hide from who you *are!* That's what drove you to *this!*" she gestured at the room.

"No, Melanie." he replied evenly. "*You* drove me to hate my life and see no value in it. *You* forced me to become a girl against my will. That *won't* be happening again."

"*Jocelyn!*" she whined in frustration.

"*Joss.*" her son corrected her sedately.

"*Fine!*" she shouted, before looking over at Dr. Benson in anger. "*Sorry!*"

"Ms. Ryan," Joss's doctor began, "Joss has chosen to express his gender identity as male. He has told me that he has *always* been male and that you *forced* him to assume a female identity against his will."

Frustrated, she spat her answer at him. "*Doctor Benson!* You have *no idea* how hard it was to make Jocelyn accept her true self! We had to take away *everything* boyish and *force* her to wear only the most feminine clothes! If she had anything even *remotely* male available, she'd run back to pretending to be a boy! We had to *make* her transition for her own good! You're not a gender specialist! You wouldn't understand!"

"I may not be," he countered, "but in addition to being a licensed psychiatrist, I have a law degree and am a member of the bar. That's why I work here. I know the law and what you just confessed to, in front of an Officer of the Law *and* an Officer of the Court, could be classed as mental abuse per Ohio Revised Code for Offenses Against the Family, section twenty-two. I'm thinking of having both you *and* your husband charged with criminal *abuse.*"

Backing away from him, she absently sat in the chair beside Joss's bed. "You can't *do* that!"

"I most certainly *can*, Ms. Ryan." he stated flatly. "Officer Webber there is here in case it becomes necessary to place you under arrest and to act as a witness. Additionally, before you were allowed in, you signed an agreement that everything in the Observation Ward is subject to being recorded." At that he pulled the digital recorder out of his pocket and showed it to her before replacing it. "Of course, if you can show that you're willing to be *reasonable* in all this, I'd be inclined to forgo *legal* action."

Reading between the lines, Melanie nodded as she glanced over at Officer Webber, his bulk a menacing reminder of what happened to Fred. "OK, Doctor Benson. I'm *listening.*"

Looking at her, he walked over to Joss and put his hand on the girlish boy's shoulder. "You and your husband, once he's released from jail, will attend child abuse counseling sessions with a councilor of *my* choosing. No getting one of your co-workers to rubber-stamp a letter after talking to *you* for five minutes the way you did with *Joss*."

Swallowing hard that he knew about that, the shadiest part of what they'd done, Melanie nodded. "*Agreed*. So then, I can take her home?"

"No, you can't take *him* home." he answered. "Part of the agreement will be that until you complete counseling, Joss will be placed under PCSA custody, *voluntarily*, by *you*. He'll be placed in a *foster* home for the duration. There is a family already willing and available to take him."

His tone turning ominous, he added the final nail to the coffin. "If you do *not* agree, I'll have Officer Webber here place you under arrest under the charge of mental abuse of a minor. With your husband in jail already for aggravated disorderly conduct, Joss will be placed under PCSA custody *anyway* as he would have no guardians out of jail to care for him." Claspng his hands behind his back, he rocked on his heels and leveled his gaze at her. "So which will it be, *Ms. Ryan*?"

Closing her eyes, she very nearly got up and attacked the man, but for the perilous presence of the police officer behind him. Believing it to be the only way out of going to jail, and knowing that no matter what she did Joss wouldn't be coming home with her, Melanie bowed her head in defeat and nodded. "*Agreed*."

After signing the form Dr. Benson had prepared that voluntarily turned over custody of Joss to the local Public Children Services Agency, Melanie left without saying a word to Joss, for which he was thankful. Having already reached out to them, the agency was prepared when Emanuel called them to say that Joss was now in their custody and to contact the foster family he'd lined up.

As Joss walked with Dr. Benson out of the observation ward several hours later, still dressed in the boy's clothes he'd been brought, he smiled at his savior. "*Thank* you, Doctor Benson!"

"I just did my job, Joss." he said with a smile. "I also hope never to have to see you again!"

"Don't *worry!*" he giggled. "The only time *you'll* ever see me again is on a purely *personal* basis! You *will* come to my eighteenth birthday party in February, won't you?"

"I'll see what I can do, Joss." he hedged, uncertain he could as he signed them both out and taking the boy through the security doors.

Joss's smile grew from pleasant to joyful as he picked up from a walk to a jog, his cap falling to the floor and releasing his hidden long brown hair as he ran straight into Susan Roberts's arms.

Daniel smiled weakly, noting how even dressed as a boy he looked so much like a girl. Hugging both Joss and his wife, he was thankful that they'd been qualified as foster parents years earlier, never knowing how it would affect their lives. "Come *on*, Joss." he grinned, picking up the fallen cap. "Let's take you *home!*"

Chapter 26 - The Truth Hurts

Living with Joss turned out to be more difficult than the pastor and his wife had believed it could be. Even though he was a boy, they realized he might find it difficult to adjust to living as a boy given his physical development. Even as Daniel drove them home, Susan noticed one major problem.

"*Daniel?* We have to drop by Joss's house before we take him home."

Stopped at a light, he turned to her. "*Why?* Anything he needs *we* can get."

Pulling her lips into a tight line, she arched her brows and nodded toward the rearview mirror. "*Dan? Look* at him." she said softly.

Still waiting for the light to change, he glanced in the mirror at his passenger. He'd seen it before they left, but once Joss had removed the uncomfortable compression band that he'd worn to rattle his mother, he at last nodded in understanding. "I see what you mean." he sighed.

When the light turned green, Daniel took the first opportunity to pull off the street and into the parking lot of a restaurant. Turning around in his seat, he sighed in frustration. "*Joss?* We need to discuss a few things before we go any further."

Worried that they'd changed their minds, he looked from one to the other. "Did... did I do something *wrong?*"

"*No, dear.*" Susan assured him. "It's just... you *look* like a young woman... and we have two little boys, eight and ten. Even dressed like that, there's no hiding what your parents *did* to you, and they're too young to understand. They might think *we* could do that to them as a kind of punishment."

Hanging his head, Joss nodded. "*I know.* Even if I stop taking hormones, I'll *never* look normal."

"Joss," the pastor spoke, "I know it's not *your* fault, but now we have to *deal* with it. We have no intention of treating you like a girl, but we *do* need to face certain... *practical* problems."

Susan saw that he was beating around the bush, so she said it plainly. "Joss? You need a *bra*. At least for *now*."

Shaking his head mournfully, Joss felt he would never escape his parents' trap. "It's no good, is it? Even now that I'm away from them, it doesn't make any *difference*, does it? It's too *late*. I'm stuck *forever* this way, *aren't* I? I'm a *woman* now. They *won*."

"It's only *temporary*, Joss." she tried to reassure him. "But for now, would you mind being a *little* bit Jocelyn for just a while longer? If you say no, we'll figure something else out."

Giving in, he accepted the inevitable and nodded. "OK. I mean, I *get* it. I have a woman's body and you have two little boys. I can't just pretend this never *happened*." Looking up at Daniel, he let it go and nodded. "I'll grab a few things, but *please* don't call me Jocelyn!"

"We won't, Joss." he promised. "And *please*, Joss. Call me Daniel. You're seventeen and we're not in church!" he tried to make light of the situation.

Smiling, Joss knew that no matter what, the pastor truly did want to help him. "Alright... *Daniel*. Let's go."

Following the boy's directions, the three drove to his house. Unfortunately, Melanie's car was in the driveway.

"She's *home*." Joss stated with dread in his voice.

"Let me do all the talking, Joss." Daniel advised as they got out. "Hopefully, she'll be *reasonable*." Walking up to the door, they knocked and waited.

Melanie had just gotten home from the jail where she was told bail couldn't be posted until Fred was finished being booked, which wouldn't be for a few more hours. She was halfway through a glass of Chardonnay when she heard the door. Opening it, she saw Joss standing there with a strange man and woman. "What do *you* want?"

"I'm Daniel Roberts and this is my wife Susan. We came to collect some of Joss's things."

"I'm sorry, *Daniel*." she spat. "But the things here belong to *Jocelyn* Ryan... a *girl*. Your *Joss* wouldn't want anything *she* has."

She was about to close the door on his face when he stopped her. "Mrs. Ryan, *please* be reasonable. If you care at *all* about your child, you'll let us get a few things and be on our way."

Downing the remainder of the glass in one swallow, she fumed and glared at the three. "*Fine!* You have five minutes!"

While Susan took Joss up to his room, Daniel stayed at the bottom of the stairs and watched Melanie pour another glass. "You have a wonderful son, Mrs. Ryan." Daniel offered an olive branch. "He's *remarkable*."

Taking a drink, she slowly walked toward him. "So, where did they find *you*? What makes you think *you're* qualified to care for my *daughter*? And it's *Ms.* Ryan!"

"I've known Joss for over five years, Mrs. Ryan." he explained simply.

"I said it's *Ms.*! Not *Mrs.*!" she barked.

Smirking slightly, he cleared his throat. "*Irritating* when someone calls you by a name you detest... *isn't* it, *Ms.* Ryan?"

"What would *you* know about it!" she snapped. "Wait, how do you know Jocelyn?" she puzzled. "Five years? That's since she *transitioned!*"

"Yes." he replied. "Joss *pretended* to be a girl because you and your husband gave *him* no choice. I never knew him as anything other than a polite and honest girl until the accident that nearly killed him a few months ago."

"How can you claim to know her if you can look at her and see a *boy!*"

"Because that's what he *is*, Ms. Ryan." he stated calmly. "All you had to do was *ask* him. Did you even *once* ask how he felt?"

Melanie scoffed. "Parents know best how to raise their own children, *Mr. Roberts!* She didn't know *what* she was! Fred and I had to *make* her see it!"

"Yet, here *he* is, five years later, still professing to be a boy. Doesn't sound like you made him see anything except that his parents didn't *want* him."

"That was those extremist *Christians* that got hold of him!" she yelled after taking another drink. "They *brainwashed* him!"

"We did no such thing." he told her evenly. "Joss only ever came to church as Jocelyn. None of us ever even *suspected* he was a boy... not in five *years.*"

Melanie's eyes went wide. "You... you belong to that group of superstitious *transphobes?*"

"*No.*" he answered, making Melanie's anger subside in confusion before he dropped the bomb. "I'm the *pastor* of the church that gave Joss some sense of solace while you *abused* him. By his own words, my congregation kept him from trying to kill himself a long time ago." Seeing her anger start to rise, he tried to forestall it. "No one in the congregation even *knows* about Joss being a boy... they *still* all think he's a girl. Susan and I are the only ones that know, and *we* only found out after the accident that took Grace's life."

Just as he said that, Joss and Susan came downstairs, the woman carrying two of his suitcases. Seeing him carrying his rolled up posters, Melanie looked at him pleadingly. "*Jocelyn!* You can't *stay* with these people! They believe in those sexist *fairytales!*"

"My name is *Joss.*" he replied evenly as he came down the steps. "And they don't believe in *fairytales*, Melanie. They believe in *God...* and so do *I.*" Standing in front of his mother who stared at him in shock, he took a breath and smiled at her as he remembered the feeling of infinite love. "I *saw* Him, Melanie. I met *God.* When I almost killed myself? He told me He gave me a rare gift. I don't understand it all, I don't think I *can*, I just know He loves and cares for us all more than all the people in the history of the world ever did or could. I *wish* you could understand."

"That's *it!*" Melanie shouted, throwing and shattering her glass on the table. "We're getting a lawyer to get you *away* from these monsters! They've made you believe in their sexist, homophobic *superstitions!* You're *not* going to live with them!"

"Yes, I *am.*" he stated calmly. "You gave up custody and Daddy's in *jail.* By the time you could get a court date to fight it, I'd be eighteen and you'd never see me again. *Please.* Just let it *go*, Mom."

Hearing Joss call her 'Mom' for the first time in five years disarmed most of her fury. She watched helplessly while the three walked out of her house, Joss pausing a moment as he got ready to close the door behind him.

"*Goodbye*, Mom. I'll always love you, no matter *what* you did to me."

As the door closed, Melanie broke down and sobbed.

Stopping at a gas station, while Daniel filled up the tank, Joss went into the restroom with a change of clothes. He slipped on a pair of woman's jeans and a modest blouse and undergarments, taking a moment to brush out his hair

and look in the mirror. *One step at a time...* he thought, remembering his mother's joke all those years ago as he grabbed his boy clothes and headed back out to the car. *At least I don't have to wear makeup or jewelry!*

Shortly afterward, they were pulling up in front of a simple home. Joss looked it over briefly as he climbed out; the light blue paint with white trim reminding him of a sunny day with little wispy clouds. Putting his black backpack that he'd put his posters in over his shoulder, he grabbed for one of the suitcases right before Daniel snatched both.

"*I'll* get those, Joss." he said with a friendly smirk. "*Come on!*"

Wrapping an arm around Joss's shoulder, the pastor's wife guided him to the front door ahead of Daniel. "*Eddy! Jimmy!*" Susan called out coming through the door. "*We're home!*"

Thunderous footsteps approached quickly while Joss braced himself for the unexpected. Standing back, he watched as Susan was enveloped by two small boys who practically threw themselves in her arms.

"*Mom!*" the larger Eddy shouted joyfully.

"*Mommy!*" the smaller Jimmy nearly cried. "You were gone *all day!* Where did..." His voice trailed off as both boys noticed that they weren't alone.

Susan hugged them quickly while Daniel carried the suitcases to their spare room. "*Eddy? Jimmy?* I'd like you to meet *Joss*, who'll be staying with us a while. *Joss?* These are our boys, Eddy and Jimmy."

While the two looked him over, Joss smiled weakly at them as he put his backpack on the floor next to the front door. "*H... hi!*"

The younger Jimmy separated from his mother first and walked up to Joss cautiously. When Joss got down on his knees, his five foot six stature making

him nearly twice Jimmy's height, the boy looked at him intently before wrapping him in a welcoming hug without a word.

Embracing the boy in return nearly made Joss cry at how sweet the sentiment was. After a moment, the two separated and Jimmy stepped back.

"Hi, Joss. I'm *Jimmy*." Gesturing over his shoulder with his thumb, he smiled. "That's Eddy!"

Getting back on his feet, Joss smiled back. "It's nice to meet you, Jimmy." Glancing up at the older boy, he nodded politely. "*Eddy*."

"You're *pretty*!" Jimmy said as he gazed up at Joss. Suddenly frowning, he asked, "Did your Mommy and Daddy *die*?"

"*Jimmy*!" Susan scolded him. "What did I tell you about asking people personal questions like that?"

"Ta' *not* to." Jimmy answered embarrassedly.

Joss tried to defuse the situation by answering him. "It's OK, Jimmy. *No*, I didn't lose my parents. They... um... they just need some time *without* me so they can fix some problems they have."

"*Oh*." the small boy said simply. "How long you stayin'?"

"I don't *know*." Joss answered, glancing up at Susan who stood next to Eddy. "Maybe only a short time. Maybe a few months. I turn eighteen in February. When's *your* birthday?"

Jimmy's eyes sparkled. "Mine's next month! I'll be nine... goin' on *ten*! Eddy hasta wait all the way 'till *October*! He'll only be *eleven*. You like *chocolate* or *strawberry* ice cream?"

"OK, boys." Susan said authoritatively. "Let me go talk to Kathy and I'll start dinner in a little bit, OK? *Scoot!*" While the two boys ran off to their room, Susan led Joss into the living room where a young girl sat on the couch staring at her smartphone. "*Hi, Kathy! How were the boys?*"

Kathy Smith tore her eyes away from the hypnotic device. "*Huh? Oh! They were great, Mrs. R! Fed 'em lunch 'bout noon. They just played in their room all afternoon.*"

Handing the girl a twenty-dollar bill, Susan smiled at her. "Thank you *so* much for helping on such short notice. Kathy? This is *Joss* who's going to be staying with us for a while."

The sixteen-year-old looked Joss up and down critically. She'd met a few of the foster children that the pastor's family took in, but Joss was different. He seemed too well cared for to need fostering. "Interesting name." she nodded to Joss in welcome. "Is it short for something?"

"My parents named me *Jocelyn*, but I *hate* that name." he shrugged.

Standing up, Kathy relaxed slightly at Joss's frankness. "*Yeah! The 'rents named me Katherine, but I just use Kathy! Katherine is so old!*" Pausing a moment, she looked at Joss more closely. "*Hey! I know you! You're that girl from church! The one that comes without parents or anyone! I hardly recognized you in jeans! You're always dressed so nice!*"

Joss blushed and looked away. "My... my parents *hate* church, but *I* like it."

"*That's cool.*" Kathy nodded. Wanting to ask why Joss was staying with the Roberts family, she thought better of it, held her tongue, and extended her hand. "Well, *whatever* the reason you're here, I hope it all turns out OK."

Susan interrupted their bonding after they shook hands. "Well, thank you for watching the boys, Kathy! Be sure to give my best to your mother!"

Grabbing her coat and purse, Kathy smiled at the woman. "Sure thing, Mrs. R! I can *always* use the extra money! Let me know anytime you need me!" Turning to Joss, the girl surprised him by giving him a friendly hug before heading for the door. "See you on Sunday, Joss! *Bye!*"

Once she left, Susan headed for the kitchen along with Joss, wanting to help. After a time, Daniel came in and watched a moment before interrupting.

"Sorry to drag Joss away, but I wanted to get Joss settled into the room."

Hearing the pastor neatly dodge every potential pronoun use, Joss became self-conscious. "Um... it's OK if you call me she and her for the time being, Pastor Roberts. It'll just be *easier* for now, and I know you know who I *really* am... so it doesn't hurt like when *they* did it."

Looking at one another a moment, Susan and Daniel turned to him, the pastor saying what they both were thinking. "We just didn't want you to feel like we only see you as 'Jocelyn, the girl from church'. You've had quite enough of *that* in your life, Joss. We'll try to minimize it as much as *possible*, OK?"

Smiling weakly at them both, he almost wanted to cry. "*Thank you!*" he sighed with a quivering breath. Hugging Susan, he followed Pastor Roberts into the room that would be his for the duration of his stay.

Living with the family also meant he'd be going in to church with them and taking on some of the responsibilities of being part of a pastor's family. He packed one nice dress for church out of habit, but putting it on that Sunday made him feel as though nothing had changed; that he was still Jocelyn and trapped in the world his parents had forced him into.

As the congregation began to arrive and Eddy and Jimmy were sent off to Sunday School, Joss stood with Susan near the front row where the pastor's wife always stood, greeting regulars and taking prayer requests. His presence with her there that Sunday caused a bit of a stir among several members.

"Hello, Mrs. Zimmerman!" Susan greeted the older woman. "Good to see you, as always!"

Harriet Zimmerman was about to smile at her before noticing Joss standing shyly behind her. "Good *morning*, Susan. May I ask why young *Jocelyn* is with you today?" She'd seen the boy almost hiding out in the rear pews for years and rumors had begun to circulate after his disappearance following the accident and what the papers had printed anonymously about the couple.

"Joss is staying with us for the time being, Mrs. Zimmerman." she explained simply. "*Family* problems. Daniel and I took Joss in as a foster child."

"I see." the woman said coldly. "Do you think that *appropriate*, Susan? I mean, you with two *boys*?"

Blinking as her smile melted slightly, Susan tried to recover. "Well, we have a separate room for the boys, and it's not like we haven't taken in teenagers that needed our help *before*! You remember the Finley girl?"

"Yes, but that's *different*." she huffed. Lowering her voice to a conspiratorial whisper, she glared at Joss a moment before turning back to Susan. "I've *heard* things about Jocelyn, Susan. That *he's* not what *she* appears to be! There's no place for that in God's house, and certainly not in the home of our pastor and his children!"

Susan looked over at Joss, who'd retreated back away from the two, nearly plastered against the wall. Turning back to the woman, she shook her head. "Mrs. Zimmerman, I'm *surprised* at you, dealing in *rumors*! Ephesians tells us not to say any unwholesome things, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs. What help to Joss is *this*?"

Uncertain if the rumors about Joss were true or not, her cheeks flushed and she turned away embarrassedly. "I... um... I see your *point*, Susan. Of course, if you say that it isn't true, then I've done the poor child wrong."

"Even if they *were* true Mrs. Zimmerman, we are tasked to *love* one another, not tear each other down." she said in answer. Glancing back to Joss, Susan extended her hand to him, making him swallow hard and close the distance to take it and stand with the pastor's wife. "Mrs. Zimmerman, I don't believe you've ever actually *met* Joss. *Joss?* This is Harriet Zimmerman!"

Nervously, Joss extended his free hand to the woman. "N... nice to meet you, Mrs. Zimmerman." he stammered.

Taking the offered hand, Harriet scrutinized Joss for any sign of masculinity. Seeing none, she smiled at him. "Nice to meet you as well, Jocelyn. I'm afraid I owe you an apology. I... I heard things about you that were ungodly and believed them. *Please* forgive me."

Taking back his hand and fidgeting his fingers in a knot, Joss sighed and looked down sadly. "It's OK, Mrs. Zimmerman. I don't blame you."

Three other parishioners that morning made similar comments. Each time Susan deftly dodged the issue without lying, instead only pointing out how spreading and listening to rumors was hurtful and against the teachings of Christ. When the time for services began and the two took their seats in the front row, Joss leaned in close to Susan and whispered to her.

"You don't have to protect me." he offered. "I don't want you or Daniel to get in trouble when the truth comes out. It's *bound* to, eventually!"

"Joss, I *told* them the truth, that rumormongering is sinful." she answered quietly, "They shouldn't be talking about *anyone* behind their back, even if the rumors *are* true."

Sitting through the sermon, he was torn between listening and thinking about what Susan had said. Just sitting in the church next to her made him feel as though he was being dishonest with everyone, but he knew his circumstances were not his fault and that he was just making the best of a bad situation.

When the time came to sing, he raised his beautifully feminine voice in song with the others, forgetting his troubles for a moment as he focused on the memory of love and compassion that had struck him to his very soul at the lowest time of his life. Bidding the members of the church goodbye with a strained grin, Joss almost collapsed when the last of them finally left.

"I don't think I can *take* much more of this, Susan." he admitted to her.

Sitting next to Joss, she took his hand and smiled at him understandingly. "I know, Joss. It's *hard*. You want to just be yourself, but..."

"...but I *can't* be, *can* I?" he interrupted her. "I might as well go back to my parents' house! I'll never *escape* it!"

"Just give it *time*!" she admonished his impatience. "You've only been with us a few days. Dan told me last night that he has something in mind that'll help. OK?"

Sighing and smiling weakly, Joss tried to be patient. "*Alright*, Susan. If you *say* so. I owe you two so much already, the *least* I can do is wait a bit more."

Two days later, Daniel called Joss into his study where he often worked on sermons during his time at home. Watching Joss sit on the small couch fluidly and gracefully out of habit, he had to remind himself who this person really was. "*Joss*, I wanted to talk to you about next Sunday's sermon as it's less a sermon and more about you, in particular. Susan told me what some of the congregation have been saying about you."

"You're going to tell them all about me?" he asked surprisedly.

"That's my intention." he answered. "*Joss*, what happened to you isn't your fault. Your parents, however well intentioned they were trying to be, did you a great deal of harm. I don't think you should suffer because of it the rest of your life."

"But I *will*, Dan." he responded, having taken less than a week to go from 'Pastor Roberts' to 'Daniel' to 'Dan'. "No matter what *anyone* says or does, I have to start facing *reality*. I'm almost a grown *woman* now... effectively I *am* already in all but the legal sense!"

The pastor looked at his charge and sighed. As much as he hated to admit it, what he'd said was true. Nothing of a boy or young man showed through in the person sitting across from him. "I know your life will never be the same as it would have been Joss, but I can't let you hide who you *are*. You can't keep pretending..."

"That's just what *Melanie* and *Fred* used to tell me." Joss interrupted as he looked at the floor.

Stopping dead, Daniel was shocked to hear Joss compare him to his parents. "*No*, what they did was *wrong*. What I need to do is undo as much of the damage they've done to you as possible."

Looking back up at the man he respected so well, Joss just shook his head. "You're my guardians now, so I have to do whatever you tell me to do. Why even ask me?"

Seeing how helpless and vulnerable he was, Daniel began to second-guess his plan. "Joss, have you changed your mind? Do you *want* to be a girl?"

Looking out the window over the man's shoulder, Joss pondered the question. *Do I? Do I actually like being a girl?* Being honest with himself, he realized the question was moot. *Like and dislike have nothing to do with it. Am I a girl?* he wondered. All the years his parents had forced it on him, he'd hated it. Since he'd gotten away from them and was suddenly being pushed the other direction, he found himself hating that, too.

"I... I honestly don't *know*, Pastor Roberts." he admitted, reverting to the man's formal title. "I just know that I don't like the idea of being pushed

one way or the other. When I used to ask Grace if she loved me as a girl or a boy, she'd tell me, 'I just love *you*.' Can't I just be *me*?"

"Whether you like it or not Joss, the world *will* see you as either a boy or a girl, a man or a woman. You can't undo thousands of years of culture and instinct in a day, a week, a year, or even a *lifetime*. People *will* see you as one or the other. Maybe that's a failing on our part, but it is what it is... and you can't *force* people to change who they are. You can make them leave you alone, but you can't shove that sort of thing down their throats and expect them to *like* you for it... or even treat you *decently*, even if they *should*. People just don't *work* that way."

"I *know* Dan, I *know*!" he replied, acknowledging the truth before he turned back to the pastor. "But the fact remains that no matter what you or I want, I'll *never* be a man, and I *can't* be a woman. I'm *stuck*... halfway both and neither at the same time." Glancing away and trying to hold back the tears, he sighed and looked at the floor. "So, what *are* you going to tell them?"

"The *truth*." he answered, standing up and walking over to the couch to sit with Joss. "That you were born a boy... that your parents *forced* you to dress like a girl... that you had no choice in it... and that everyone should *love* and *accept* you as the young man you are, regardless of what you *look* like."

Laughing a little, Joss shook his head. "You sound like a transgender rights activist... that I should be treated as the gender I identify with, even though everyone looks at me and sees a girl!"

"The difference is that you *are* a boy and you couldn't have chosen otherwise, Joss. It's the way God *made* you."

Getting up, Joss became uncomfortable with the pastor's plan. "Pastor, you can do what you like, I can't *stop* you, but I would *ask* you not to do this. Otherwise I won't be able to go to church anymore! They won't understand! They'll all have their own ideas of what to do about me and it'll just cause a

big argument. I'll drive people away if I *do* go, so that means I won't be *able* to go!"

"Joss, I once told you that you'd be welcome in any church I run." Daniel reminded him. "You're a boy, about to be a man, and you've got to *face* this like a man! Come with us on Sunday. Let them see you for who you *are*."

Pacing frustratedly, Joss paused and looked at Daniel. "Everything inside me is screaming that this is *wrong*... that it's no different than what *they* did to me. I *want* to be a normal boy, but I won't be forced into it the way I was forced to be a girl. So do what you want, but I won't be any part of it or help you do it. I'm sorry." Walking away sadly, Joss stopped right before leaving. "Pastor? One last thing. I won't *let* you push me to be *anything*. I promised Doctor Benson. *Nobody* gets to decide who I am, except *me*." Returning to his room, he left Daniel alone to ponder his words.

The following Sunday Joss didn't attend church, instead spending his time at the neighborhood park. Certain of the rightness of his own position, Daniel forged ahead anyway and gave his open sermon to the congregation, telling them of Joss's trials and inviting others to talk about the things they'd heard and the person they knew in Joss. The response he got was not at all what he'd expected.

Unwilling to even listen to the idea that Joss was an 'involuntary girl', several families walked out the minute Daniel suggested they let Joss come at all. Others stayed, but some demanded that Joss be barred from church unless he could be made to look like a boy. Still others insisted that since Joss looked like a girl and *couldn't* be made to look like a boy without surgery, having him dress like one would only blur gender lines, encouraging girls to dress more like boys. They in turn demanded that Joss either dress and behave like a girl or be barred.

Only a minority of the congregation, those who actually knew Joss well and liked him, were willing to accept Joss the way he was. By the end of services,

the congregation had indeed fractured and Daniel realized too late that the girlish boy had been right; he should have never tried to force the situation.

Joss ended up only staying with the pastor and his family for a few weeks. In the mean time, Hank and Joyce Edwards had updated their insufficient placement training to care for a child needing specialized treatment. They'd fostered a few children in the past several years, and were happy to oblige when Dr. Benson suggested taking Joss in, but they'd never qualified to care for a special needs child which, like it or not, Joss had become involuntarily.

For the second time that month, Joss found himself moving to another place he might call home.

Chapter 27 - You Can Never Go Home Again

To give him a room of his own, Hank and Joyce Edwards worked every spare minute to convert their den into another bedroom. Previous foster children had shared a room either with Tracy if they were a girl or David if a boy, but the family quickly realized that Joss didn't really fit either and did their best to adapt.

It was the first Sunday after he'd moved in that the trouble began.

Joyce saw the meager clothes Joss had been able to get from his home and that the pastor's family had gotten for him and had insisted that she take him shopping. Barred from church services, not by the pastor but by the simple fact that if he showed up he'd drive the majority of other worshipers away, Joss was out of sorts and moody. He'd also not taken any hormones in over three weeks.

Sitting in the back seat of their minivan, Joss stared out the window while Tracy chattered on.

"It's gonna be *so* much fun with you living with us, Joss!" she said happily. "And you get an all new wardrobe! I am *so* jealous!"

"*Meh.*" Joss shrugged absently. "It's just clothes."

"Yeah, but you always *did* look so great all the time! You have good taste!"

"*Melanie* bought all my clothes." he grumbled.

"*Oh*, well *that's* alright! You have *me* along to help you find your perfect style!" the girl chirped.

"*Tracy.*" Joyce warned from the driver's seat. "Need I remind you that Joss *isn't* a girl?"

Suddenly brought back down to earth, Tracy's mood soured. "*Oh... oh yeah. I... I kinda forgot. Sorry, Joss.*"

Scowling at nobody as he continued to watch the world go by the window, he shrugged again, not even replying.

The shopping trip turned into a disaster. Steadfastly refusing to shop in the women's department, every time Joss thought he found something that he liked in the men's section it either wouldn't fit his feminine body or looked girly on him. Frustrating him until he stormed out of the department store, he walked the six miles back to the Edwards's home alone. Coming up the driveway two hours later, the minivan parked in the open garage, his mood had softened to one of regretfulness.

Opening the front door quietly, he slipped in unnoticed and around into the converted den. Laying down on the small twin bed that was used whenever they were caring for a foster child, Joss curled up and cried. He cried for his lost childhood, his lost church, and for his hated female body. After a short time he fell into a restless sleep.

Standing at the shore of an ocean, Joss gazed out at the waves and listened to them crash against the sand. Glancing down at himself, he saw hands that looked like a grown man's and his clothes were a man's jeans and polo shirt. Feeling his scalp, he felt the short-cropped hair and smiled. Relaxing and watching the waves, he wasn't even startled by the familiar voice next to him, almost expecting her to be there with him.

"Peaceful, isn't it Joss." Grace stated softly.

"*Yeah. It's nice.*" he said quietly as he turned to her, noticing the deep rumble of his smooth baritone voice that at once seemed odd and perfectly normal. He was surprised, and yet at the same time not so, that she appeared older, perhaps how she might have been in her twenties had she lived.

"So is *this* what you really want?" she asked, turning and looking at him with a smile. "You look nice, don't get me wrong, but it's not very... *you*."

"I know." he sadly responded, turning back to the ocean before lowering himself to sit in the sand. As he did, he noticed that his hands had changed back into the feminine shape he was used to. That's when he became aware of the sand against his rear, not through a pair of jeans, but through a light flowing skirt as he looked down at the dress he wore. "I guess this is all I can ever be." he grumbled, his voice once more light and feminine.

Sitting down next to him, Grace leaned over and bumped his shoulder the way she used to always do. "*Hey*, look at it *this* way, you'll save a *ton* on shaving cream and men's deodorant!"

Grimacing, he turned to her. "*Grace?* Why are you here?"

"Just trying to help." she said simply. "You were kinda mean to Tracy and Joyce. In fact, you've been downright bitchy for *weeks*! For someone who's finally gotten what they always wanted, you're awfully *unhappy* about it!"

"*I know!*" he yelled at her. "I just... I hoped... *Ugh!* What's the *use?* I can't get *away* from it! *Never!* Goddamn *assholes!* They ruined my *life!*"

Sitting in silence a moment, Grace broke it with a question. "So, you just gonna give up and be a *jerk* the rest of your life?"

Picking up a fistful of sand, he threw it in frustration, only for it to fly back in his face.

"*Joss!*" Grace yelled as she spat and stood up, even as Joss tried to get sand out of his eyes. "Nice *move!* You got sand everywhere!"

Taking a moment to wipe his face clear of the grit, Joss lay down on the warm sand with his back to her. "I'm *sorry*, Grace."

"Don't be *sorry*, Joss!" she snapped. "Just don't *do* it! You get mad and throw a fit and all it's gonna do is fly back and hurt you and everyone *around* you!"

Seeing the allegory in his situation, he nodded, the sand grinding into his long brown hair as he did so. "I *know* Grace, it's just... it's so hard! I'll *never* be free of them!"

"They're your *parents*, Joss." she said softly and lovingly as she lay next to him and petted his hair. "No one can *ever* escape them. Even kids who their parents gave them up for adoption and never even *met* them can't escape what they did. I mean, what did you *think* was going to happen? You'd get away and suddenly be like it'd never *happened*?"

"*No!*" he grumbled, still laying in the sand and enjoying the feel of her fingers running through his hair. "I just... I thought it would be *easier*."

"*Why?*" she asked softly.

"Because I could stop being what *they* wanted me to be and start being *myself*."

"And who *are* you?" Grace asked, lying against his back as she continued to brush his long hair with her fingers.

About to say 'a boy', Joss caught himself, knowing the answer Grace had always given him. "I'm *me*."

He could hear the smile on her lips as she responded. "*That's* my Joss!" she giggled. "I think you may actually be *getting* it! Your *gift*..."

Lying next to her, Joss just enjoyed the closeness. "Your mom *really* misses you, Grace."

"I *know*." she sighed. "I miss her, too. Tell her I *love* her?"

"I will." he promised. "*Grace?* Is this a dream or is it real?"

"Little from column *A*, little from column *B*... little bit neither one." she tried to explain. "I'm a *Helper*. People used to call us Angels, but Helper really describes us better. Most the time, people don't even get to know they've *been* helped. Only a special few get to know. Like *you*."

"My parents would say it's just a dream... a fantasy my mind cooked up to help me get over losing you."

"Yeah, well your parents also said you were *gay*, and a *girl*, so... consider the source!" Grace pointed out, making both giggle together as they used to. Sadly, her voice became distant. "I gotta go now, Joss. Remember, I'll *always* love you."

"I love you, *too*." he sighed, not catching the first part of her statement as he reveled in the second. Just as he realized what she'd said, he sat up and found himself in his room. "*Grace!*"

"*Shhh!*" Joyce soothed him, reaching out to run her fingers through his hair some more. "It's *alright*, Joss!"

"Aunt *Joyce!*" he squeaked, his mind slowly coming out of the dream state he'd been in and back to his harsh reality. "Aunt Joyce, I'm *really* sorry about this afternoon! I just... I'm frustrated is all! I'm not a girl, but I'm not a boy, either! I'm a *nothing!*"

"*Joss Ryan!*" she barked, her brow furrowing. "I will not have you *saying* things like that about yourself! You're a wonderful *person*, boy *or* girl, and we *love* you!"

Calming himself, Joss relaxed back down onto the bed where the woman resumed combing his hair with her fingers. "I'm *sorry*, Aunt Joyce."

"It's alright, sweetie." she soothed. "You've had a pretty rough time. We just want to take care of you." After a few minutes trying to ease his fears and frustrations away, Joyce asked, "Do you dream about Grace *often*?"

Shaking his head, he relaxed. "Not since I got out of the hospital." Rolling over to look at her, he swallowed lightly in nervousness. "I... I feel like she was really here just now, like she's watching over me and trying to help."

"Like a guardian angel?" Joyce asked kindly.

"More like a *psychiatrist*!" he giggled. "She asks me questions I don't want to hear 'cuz I already know the answer." Changing topics, he returned to one from earlier. "Aunt Joyce? What am I gonna do? I can't dress like a boy... I look *ridiculous*! Like a late-teen tomboy that refuses to grow up!"

Not sure how to answer, and afraid to sound like she was pushing him in any direction, she shrugged. "I don't know, Joss. I'm sorry, but I just *don't*. Grownups don't *have* all the answers, dear. What do *you* want to do?"

"Go back in time six years and run away from home!" he answered honestly.

Joyce stopped petting his hair and helped him sit up. "Well, until we find Wells's time machine, how about we try going back to the store, *without* company, just you and me, and find you something to wear that suits you? You can't just keep wearing the same four outfits all the time!" Smiling, she added, "You'll give us a bad name!"

Laughing, Joss got up and tried again. This time shopping in the women's department, he managed to find enough jeans, tops, and other things that fit well and actually looked good on him that he didn't mind as much that they looked feminine. *At least there are no skirts!* he consoled himself. He was putting them away in the dresser and closet in his makeshift bedroom when Tracy knocked on his open door and came in.

"Hi, Joss." she said solemnly. "Look, about earlier, I'm *sorry*. I... I just have a *really* hard time seeing you as a..." Noticing the clothes he was putting away, she stared at him with an expression of betrayal. "*Joss!* After all that, you got women's clothes *anyway*? What's your *damage*?"

"*Trace!*" he snapped back, "I just need to kind of find my *own* thing, *OK*? I'm not *really* a girl, but at least these things *fit* and I have to wear *something!* Or do you think I should adopt the *nudist* lifestyle?"

Glaring at each other sternly a moment, the two slowly began to crack smiles, eventually devolving into a giggle-fit. Calming down after a few minutes, Tracy just smiled at him. "I'm *sorry*, Joss. I know your parents *royally* screwed you up, and I'm not really *helping* much. You've just always been my little... um..." She stopped as she realized she was still doing it. "*Sorry.*"

Sighing, Joss shook his head. "It's *fine*, Trace. I understand. You look at me and you see the same thing everyone *else* does. A *girl.*"

"Does it count that I *want* to see you differently?" she asked hopefully.

"*Yes*, Trace!" he grinned. "Yes it *does!*"

The year passed into summer, with the twins turning seventeen in mid-July. Joss tried to settle in to his new situation, but each day found him feeling more irritable, moody, and on an emotional roller coaster. By the end of the month, Hank and Joyce took him aside one evening to talk.

"*Joss?*" Hank began, "We think you should start seeing someone about your problems. You obviously need help coming to terms with things. You might even need... *something*... to help with your *emotional* problems."

"*What?* You wanna put me on *drugs* now?" he snapped, instantly regretting it and crying as he tried to take it back. "Oh, *Hank!* I'm *sorry!* I just..."

"We *know*, dear." Joyce forgave him quickly. "I think you know that we need to do *something* to help, though! We can't just sit by and watch while you tear yourself apart!"

Sighing and collecting himself, he looked at his two caregivers. "So what did you have in mind?"

"We've made an appointment for you to see our family doctor, Dr. Yates. She should be able to point us in the right direction." Hank explained.

Grinning weakly back, Joss agreed. "*Alright*, lets go find out how much *Prozac* she wants to put me on!"

Sitting on the examination table after getting dressed again, Joss waited with Joyce in the exam room for the doctor to return. He'd already done the blood tests she'd requested to be completed prior to the visit, so the physical exam was to find out if there were any other issues.

Dr. Elizabeth Yates returned and smiled at him gently. "Well, other than a few minor *physical* issues, I would say you were a perfectly normal and healthy fifteen-year-old girl."

"Except I'm a seventeen-year-old *boy*." he pointed out.

"I could *tell*." she retorted slyly at him. "*Anyway*, the blood tests I had you do last week came back and there *is* something concerning *there*." Pulling out the report, she handed a copy to Joyce. "Joss has almost no testosterone *or* estrogen in his blood, and given his development through puberty, his body is responding as though he's entered menopause. It explains the majority of the emotional instability he's been experiencing, as well as his general lack of energy."

"What do you suggest, Doctor Yates?" Joyce asked curiously.

After a moment of hesitation, glancing at Joss uneasily, she stated, "Hormone Replacement Therapy." before turning back to Joyce. "He needs testosterone or estrogen. Without one or the other, he'll start to lose bone mass, gain weight, lose energy, and his health will deteriorate." Looking once more at the boy, she regarded him sadly. "*I know* HRT carries a bad history with you Joss, but I'm afraid it's what you *need* at this point."

Joyce took the lull to ask the big question. "So then, which should it be?"

Dr. Yates shrugged. "I'm afraid that part is up to *you*. Yes, I know that's the *hard* part and I'm officially chickening out of telling you which way to go!" Laughing a moment with Joyce, the doctor's tone turned serious. "*Honestly* Joyce, we just don't have enough information to tell you all the ramifications. To the best of my knowledge, if we put him on testosterone therapy, there's a good likelihood there would be... *issues*."

Facing Joss, she looked at him helplessly. "You *would* start to develop *some* masculine traits, muscle and facial hair growth, and your voice *might* break, but in the end you'll still look more feminine than masculine. At best, you'll be *androgynous*. I'm sorry. I wish I had better options for you."

"It's not *your* fault, Doctor Yates." he glumly replied. Biting his lower lip, he pretty much knew the answer to the question, but knew he needed to ask it anyway. "What if I... um... go back on estrogen?"

Somberly, the doctor looked absently at the papers she held. "You'd go back to normal female hormone levels and stay pretty much as you *are*, Joss." Turning once more to Joyce, she smiled hopefully. "There are *surgical* options. We could put him on testosterone, wait a few years, and then try to help fix his androgyny with plastic surgery. A mastectomy to begin with, then facial reconstruction to give him more masculine facial features. Those *are* options."

"But that would be *years* down the road, *right?*" Joyce asked hesitantly.

"Yes, I'm afraid so." Dr. Yates admitted. "And even if your insurance covers Gender Identity Disorder, which most don't, *none* that I know of cover *GID reversal*, which in Joss's case it would be considered as such. Even then, the results might not work as well as you'd hope. It's one of the reasons there is such a high suicide rate for those that try to reverse gender reassignment. They simply can never get back all that they *lost*."

"I'll take the estrogen." Joss glumly acquiesced after a few moments' silence. "At least then I won't feel so *awful* all the time."

"Are you *sure*?" Joyce asked intently. "Hank and I will make things work no matter *what* you decide. Don't worry about the cost! It's only money!"

Nodding in resignation, Joss sighed. "Yeah, I'm sure. I know I'll never be who I would have been if my parents had let me be myself. I guess I've known that since I was fourteen. I'll take it."

"I can put you on a very minimal amount, Joss." Dr. Yates offered. "Just enough to make it easier on you."

"Thanks, Doctor Yates." he said looking at her. "I know you're trying to help, but if I do this of my own free will, I might as well do it *right*. Give me however much you think I need to stay healthy."

Within a week, Joss's moods had stabilized. By the time school was due to start his senior year, Joss seemed to be back to normal for him. The only major thing wrong was that he couldn't go back to church.

Sitting in the coffee shop with Daniel, Joss sipped his tea and glanced at the pastor, having just told him of his return to hormone therapy.

"*Well...*" he answered, "I can understand your reasons, Joss. I don't agree with them, though."

"Dan, even if I *tried* to go back," Joss explained, "I would *never* be a man. My *mother* saw to that."

"You don't *know* that, Joss!" he insisted. "Only *God* can know that!"

"God may know the results without even trying, but that doesn't make it impossible for medical science to make a really good *guess*." he countered. "I've *seen* what happens to people who try and go back, Dan. It's *never* very good. I looked it up. A shocking number of them end up in the *morgue*."

"They aren't *you* though, Joss!" he almost shouted. "You're *different*!"

"*Why*?" he asked. "What makes me so different that I should expect different results?"

"Your *faith*, Joss!" he pressed. "With the faith of a *mustard* seed you can move *mountains*! How much more could you do with *Him* on your side!"

"I *do* have faith, Dan." Joss admitted. "But faith won't undo what's been *done* to me."

"You have to put in the *effort*." he argued. "You can't just sit and *pray* for it! You have to *try*! Then trust Him to meet you the rest of the way."

"It sounds good on *paper* Pastor, but God doesn't care about my body, *does* He? Isn't this just a *shell*? A temporary housing for the immortal me within? Why would He bother working a miracle just for my vanity?" Joss shook his head. "No, it's too late for any of that. It would be vain and wasteful to try and change myself back into something I can never be."

Daniel Roberts turned his coffee cup around idly. "You know that so long as you remain looking like a girl you can't attend our church. Believe me, I've tried *repeatedly* to convince the congregation to accept you as you are, but I've been warned by the church council that if I continue to press the

point, they'll fire me and hire *another* pastor. I'm thinking of just resigning to save them the trouble. I *told* you that you'd be welcome in any church I lead. I have no intention of going *back* on that promise."

"*No!*" Joss pleaded. "*No*, Pastor Roberts! I can't *let* you do that! They *need* you! Maybe now more than *ever!* *I'll* be alright. I can always find a church where they *don't* know me as Jocelyn. I *promise*, I won't lose my faith over this, *OK?* Just promise me you won't *abandon* the others!"

Daniel looked at him and saw the genuine concern in his eyes. Glancing down, he reluctantly agreed. "Alright. I'll let it *go*. I have to say, you'll be missed. *Some* of the congregation ask about you every week. How you are and what you're doing."

"Tell them... Tell them I'm *fine!*" he said with a smile.

Joss tried attending other churches, but none seemed to have the same feeling he'd gotten from the simple little church on Spring Drive. He met with Pastor Roberts twice more, talking about various issues, but his voluntary return to estrogen seemed to be the death knell of their relationship. As summer turned to fall, the two stopped reaching out more and more until there was too much time between them for either to bridge the gap.

School went on and by mid-October the general sense of people's guilt over how they'd treated Joss and Grace over the years waned with fading memories. So too was gone all the support he'd had over his transition. His Government teacher even went so far as to ridicule him openly, only calling him 'Jocelyn' and accusing him of setting a poor example to other LGBT students.

By the time November came and school was back after Halloween weekend, Joss was once more eating alone. Tracy wasn't snubbing him so much as they were just too different to really enjoy hanging out together. David likewise had moved on. Being on the Varsity football team left him little time to hang out with his socially awkward friend.

With Thanksgiving approaching, Joss had begun to feel like the proverbial unwelcome houseguest. Joyce and Hank did everything they could to make him feel at home and bought him everything he wanted or needed, but it was an isolated existence. With no real friends and without a church to call home, he drifted from day to day much as he had in his time after he'd lost Jennifer. Slowly depression set in and began to make Joss think of easier times.

The day before Thanksgiving, since they were home from school, Joss talked to Joyce about it.

"I was thinking of calling my parents and asking if they'd like to have me for the holiday tomorrow." he suggested idly as he cut up the carrots. "After all, Thanksgiving is a *family* holiday. You all don't need *me* around for it."

Stopping with her hand still stuffed in a twenty-pound bird, Joyce looked at him like he'd gone mad. "How can you even *think* of going back to them?" she asked incredulously. "They *abused* you, Joss! We won't *allow* it! You *are* family to us! We care for you just as much as if you were our own *child*!"

"I *know*, Aunt Joyce." he said with a melancholy lilt. "It's just... I *miss* them sometimes. I haven't even *spoken* to 'em since I got out of the psycho ward."

"It was an *observation* ward." Joyce corrected him as she pushed the stuffing further into the bird. Finishing up, she turned to him as she washed her hands. "You're not *happy* here, *are* you Joss?"

"Oh, it's *fine*, Aunt Joyce." he admitted half-heartedly as he slowly sliced carrots. "It's just... I was thinking, maybe now that they see how *serious* I am about who I am, they might treat me *differently*. I... I do still *love* them, even after all they *did* to me."

Walking over to him, she took the knife from his hands and led him over to sit at the kitchen table. "Are you *sure* about this?" she asked.

Looking at her and taking a breath, he let it out slowly as he answered. "No, but I think I have to at least *try*. Worst case I can walk back over here. It's only a few blocks. They can't *stop* me from leaving, right?"

"Not *legally*, no." Joyce said suspiciously. "Tell you what. Help me finish getting things ready for tomorrow and I'll give them a call and test the waters, so to speak. Then, if you *still* want to, I'll walk you there tomorrow morning and stay with you a bit until I'm sure you're *safe*. Does that sound fair?"

"You shouldn't have to spend time away from your family on Thanksgiving just for *me*." he argued.

"That's the *deal*, Joss." she stated seriously. "We're your guardians and are responsible for what *happens* to you. *Take* it or *leave* it."

Giving in, Joss nodded. "*Alright*, Aunt Joyce."

Once they'd completed the food preparations for the next day, Joyce did as she promised and dialed the Ryan residence, only to get a recording. As she listened intently, her eyes grew wide and she hung up the phone in disgust. "*Figures!*" she spat at the device.

"What's *wrong*?" Joss asked curiously.

"Your *parents* have apparently decided that they're too *embarrassed* to tell the people they know the *truth* about what happened to you and have decided to concoct some story that you've been abducted by religious *extremists!*"

"No, that's just the way they see it." Joss said disappointedly. "Like I told you, they're *convinced* that Pastor Roberts and the rest of the congregation brainwashed me into becoming a Christian and turning against my transition. Funny when you consider that I can't even go *back* there now that they know about me! Ha, ha."

Getting another idea, Joyce smiled and looked at him. "Joss? I need to call someone. Can you excuse me for a bit, dear?"

Nodding, he went off to his room after getting cleaned up. Lying in his bed, he could hear Joyce talking on the phone, but not what she was saying. He considered eavesdropping to find out, certain that it had to do with him, but thought better of it and just lay back and began to daydream once again about his pretend life as a normal boy.

The next morning, Joss got up and got dressed in a pair of slacks and a plain white blouse. Taking the time to do his hair simply, he left his room to join the family for breakfast. As soon as he walked out of his door, his smile grew wide. "*Judy!*" he yelled running to her and falling into her loving arms.

"Happy *Thanksgiving*, Joss!" Judy said as she held him. "I take it you're *glad* to see me?"

"*Immensely!*" he cried as he held her tightly. "I've missed you *so* much! I haven't seen you in *months!*"

"I missed you *too*, baby." she sighed. Releasing one another, she looked at him and smiled. "You look *nice* today! What would you think about spending Thanksgiving with *me*? It'll just be the *two* of us. Think you can *stand* that much of me?"

Blushing at the compliment, Joss nodded happily. "I'd *love* to, Judy! And Happy Thanksgiving to you, *too!*"

Chapter 28 - Family is Who Loves You

Joss was happier than he'd ever thought possible. In the days that followed Thanksgiving, he'd started staying over at Judy's house more and more often. While he cared for the Edwards family and knew they loved him for himself, he loved Judy far more than his own mother. Once she became a licensed foster home in mid-December, Judy took over care of Joss officially, moving him from one house to the other with Joyce and Hank's blessings.

Of the three families that had taken him in, it was with Judy that the lost boy flourished. While Pastor Roberts and Susan had offered spiritual comfort, and Hank and Joyce Edwards offered financial stability and freedom, he didn't need those things. With Judy's unconditional love and support, along with the strict discipline of a Marine's wife, Joss's attitude turned from one of getting by and drifting from day-to-day to one where he felt he had a purpose; to make Judy *proud* of him.

For Judy's part, having Joss in her home was like having a little piece of her daughter alive again. She'd been very much alone in the seven months since Grace died. Having been on a date with Greg when the call had come telling her that her daughter was dead, out of misplaced guilt she'd never seen him again. There were times when she felt pangs of sadness when Joss would remind her of her lost daughter, but those were more than made up for in the times she and Joss would share together as mother and child. The two bonded over their common loss and found in each other what they needed; solace, togetherness, and forgiveness.

Getting ready for Christmas was a new experience for Joss. While he'd seen Christmas trees in the Edwards home growing up, he'd never been able to take part in the holiday that his parents forbade. Decorating the family tree together on Christmas Eve, Joss looked over at Judy and smiled. "I *love* you, Judy." he said utterly spontaneously. Realizing he'd said it out loud for the first time, he blushed and turned away embarrassedly.

"*Joss!*" she said kindly. Putting the ornament down and walking over to him, she replied as she took him in a hug. "I love you *too*, sweetheart!"

Stopping their decorating for a time, they sat and talked.

"*Judy?*" he asked tentatively. "Um... I've wanted to ask you something for a while now, but I wasn't sure *how*."

"You can ask me anything you *like*, *Joss!*" she said, looking at him happily.

"Can... um... may I call you *Mom?*" Terrified that it was asking too much, he tried to back out of it. "No, you know what? I'm *sorry*. It's *stupid*. Never mind! Let's get back..."

"*Joss!*" she said in a raised voice to get his attention. "If you would let me *answer?*" Seeing him look away fearfully, she could see him waiting for the inevitable disappointment. "*Joss*, I've known you for over three years, and in that time I've come to think of you as my own child. I *should* have become your mother-in-law, so... *yes*."

Not believing his ears, *Joss* turned to her in utter shock. "You *mean* it? I mean, you wouldn't *mind?*"

"I think it would be an *honor* for you to call me Mom, sweetie! I *love* you!" she said as a tear fell down her cheek.

"I love you too... *Mom*." he tried the name on for size as he also started to cry. Hugging one another, they cried, dried their eyes, and eventually went back to decorating the tree, together.

Several times *Judy* would have to stop to comfort *Joss* as he cried at having a truly loving mother or for all that he'd lost in life, only for *Judy* to find an ornament that *Grace* had made in Kindergarten or one that used to belong to *Scott* and *Joss* would find himself consoling her. When at last all of the

decorating was done, they sat back on the couch together and watched the lights twinkle while Christmas music played on the stereo.

Ending the evening with a Wright family tradition, watching a Christmas movie and opening one present each, after watching *White Christmas*, Joss watched anxiously as Judy opened her present. "I hope you like it, Mom." he said nervously.

"I'm sure I will, dear!" she said as the paper ripped away from the wide flat box. Opening the lid, she nearly cried again as she saw the glass-framed eight by ten oil painting of Grace standing by the ocean, watching the waves, and looking as though she were in her twenties. "Oh, *Joss!* This is *beautiful!*" Tears streaming down her cheeks, she held it to her chest and hugged it. "I can almost feel you hugging me, baby!"

Getting up, Joss wrapped his arms around her and held her while she cried. "I didn't mean to make you *sad*, Mom."

"It's *OK!*" she said, her tears starting to ebb. "I'm not *sad*, I just *miss* her!"

"Me *too*, Mom." Joss admitted softly. "She told me to tell you that she loves you and misses you, too. When I saw her last, she looked like *this.*"

Sobbing tears of happiness and sadness at the same time, it took several minutes and most of a box of tissues before they could come to his present. As he unwrapped the gift meticulously, Judy scoffed at his fastidiousness.

"Come *on*, sweetie! Before midnight comes and Santa skips our *house!*"

Giggling, Joss shook his head. "This is my first Christmas present *ever*, Mom! I want to keep the paper!"

"Oh, alright!" she gave in. "But just this *once!* I want to see torn paper and ribbons tomorrow!"

Carefully removing the wrapping paper as he nodded happily, he set it aside. The long slim white box opened easily as he took off the lid and his eyes went wide. "*Mom!*" he said with a breath, taking the golden chain out and holding it up to see the simple, inornate, golden cross.

"It's not *much* dear, but I hope you like it!" she said with a smile.

Pulling it around his neck, he fastened the clasp behind himself and let it lay over the simple cotton pajama shirt he wore, looking down at it. "I *love* it, Mom! *Thank* you so much! I... I've never *had* one before."

"I *know*, baby." she smiled at him. "Merry *Christmas!*"

"Merry *Christmas*, Mom!" he said as he got up and hugged her tightly. "I *love* you!"

What Judy lacked in finances, she made up for in attentiveness and true motherly love, which was something Joss needed even more than things. His big present that year was learning that she had set in motion officially adopting Joss as her son. Getting a court date just before he turned eighteen, they stood in front of the judge who glanced down at the paperwork and frowned.

"Mrs. *Wright*," he asked curiously, "I see here that Jocelyn turns eighteen next week. Why are you requesting formal adoption of your foster child?"

She swallowed nervously before answering. "Your honor, I *love* Joss just as much as my own departed daughter. I want Joss to be part of my family *always*. Not just to take care of until age eighteen, but for the rest of my *life*... and I want Joss to *know* it. So I guess the *simplest* answer I can give is, out of *love*, your honor."

Looking over the rest of the paperwork, he noted one other thing. "I see that you've also petitioned for change of name with the adoption." Turning to

Joss, he smiled and peered over his reading glasses at the boy. "Are you *agreeable*, young lady?"

Standing next to Judy in a dark blue lady's suit jacket and matching slacks, Joss nodded solemnly. "Yes, sir... I mean... *yes*, your honor!"

Leaning back, he pursed his lips. "Very well." Reading over the rest of the paperwork, he glanced up at the two and smiled briefly before signing the form. "Then it is so ordered. From this day forward your name will be Joss Vale Wright. *Congratulations*, Mrs. Wright... *Joss!*"

Processing the judge's order took the rest of the day, but in the end the two came out of the family court building legally as mother and son. When Joss graduated that June, he walked with the boys instead of the girls, his fresh new haircut letting him easily blend in with the sea of unisex robes that hid his feminine shape. Meeting up with Tracy and David after the ceremonies, he hugged Tracy happily.

"We *did* it!" Joss and Tracy almost squealed together.

Smiling at one another, he then briefly hugged David with plenty of back slaps and the three of them posed for pictures for their parents, both together and separately.

Driving to the Edwards home afterward for their graduation party, it being much larger than their own house, Joss looked over at Judy with a grin that wouldn't stop. Pulling up, he saw something that made his smile melt. "Oh *no!*" There, parked in front of them on the street, was the vehicle he'd long ago christened 'the Lib-mobile'. "What're *they* doing here?"

Putting her car in park, Judy swallowed hard. "I didn't tell you they were coming because I wanted you to enjoy the moment. They were at your commencement ceremony, too."

"I don't *want* to see them, Mom!" Joss shouted at her, immediately regretting it. "*Sorry*, I shouldn't yell, but what could *they* possibly want?"

"To see *you*." she answered simply. "Nothing more. They finally completed that counseling course Doctor Benson made them take to avoid prosecution. They're on strict orders *not* to refer to you by your old name or as she, her, or in any *other* feminine way... or out they go! Even an *accidental* slip means they get the boot! *OK?*"

It had been almost a full year since he'd last seen them. Even though he still loved and missed them, Judy had taken their place in his heart. Dreading the encounter, Joss sighed and shook his head. "*OK*, Mom. I'll trust *you*."

"*That's* my brave boy!" she said lovingly as she patted his cheek and the two climbed out of the new model car that Judy got from the insurance settlement against the drunk driver that had killed her daughter. She'd been told that she could sue for far more, but she balked. Suing him wouldn't punish him further as it wouldn't be him she could sue, but the insurance company that had covered him; and money wouldn't bring her daughter back. Instead she settled for enough to buy a new car, bury Grace, and have some left over that she'd put away.

Going up the walkway to the front door hand in hand, Joss began to sweat nervously as they entered the house. Moving to the living room, Joss saw the banner that read, "Happy Graduation, Class of 2011!" and smiled. Around the room were all the people who cared about him, as well as many of the most popular kids in school from the cheerleading squad and football team. Meanwhile, through the window he could see in the back yard were even more graduates playing volleyball, laughing, and enjoying their freedom from school.

Looking back in the living room, he saw David talking with Hank and Pastor Roberts, while nearby Susan Roberts talked animatedly with Joyce Edwards. Tracy meanwhile was over by the back door, laughing and drinking punch

with three other cheerleaders, her football-player boyfriend Mike hovering next to her. Lastly, he saw Dr. Benson talking with Fred and Melanie over in the far corner of the room. Everyone's eyes turned toward the two as they came in.

Greeting and hugging Daniel and Susan and all four Edwards, and making polite small talk with some of his fellow graduates, he at last turned to Dr. Benson who stood between Joss and his parents. "Thanks for *coming*, Doc!" he smiled at the man who he considered his living guardian angel.

Shaking Joss's hand firmly, Emanuel grinned at Joss genuinely. "I'm sorry I couldn't make your birthday. I'm glad to be here *today*, though." Glancing over his shoulder toward Fred and Melanie, he turned back to their son. "You look *good*! I might even go so far as to say *happy*!"

Blushing and looking away, Joss smiled embarrassedly. "*Thanks! I am!*"

As Dr. Benson stepped aside, Fred and Melanie walked up to him cautiously and took in the changes in his appearance. His hair was short, but the vaguely feminine style was still there and his formerly pierced ears had tiny scars where the holes had closed from lack of use. He had to wear a lady's plain white cotton blouse due to his bosom, a man's shirt simply not fitting right, but he wore men's black slacks and dress shoes. The only piece of jewelry he wore was the simple gold cross Judy had given him for Christmas.

All in all, he looked like an androgynous young woman trying to look like a man, but much happier than the two had seen him since he was five.

Fred spoke first. "Um... congratulations... *Joss*." Almost wanting to pull Joss into a hug, he stopped himself and instead just pushed his hand out to the boy. "How *are* you?"

Shaking his father's hand, Joss looked back at him with a cold expression. "*Fine*, thank you. And *you*, Mr. Ryan?"

Wincing at the formal mode of address, he tried to warm their relationship up slightly. "You can call me *Fred*, Joss. I think we know each other *that* well."

"*No* sir, I don't believe we *do*. I don't think you *ever* knew me, Mr. Ryan."

Taking a deep breath, the man exhaled it slowly and nodded. "I guess maybe you're right. I deserved that."

Melanie could hardly stand it. Looking at her child, the only thing she could see was the gold cross hanging around his neck. "I see you're still wasting your time on that sexist, homophobic..."

"*Mel!*" Fred barked at her. "Do you need to *leave*? Because I won't let you spoil this time we have with our... our *son*."

Narrowing her eyes at Fred, she scowled at him before turning back to Joss. "I was just stating a *fact*. So, *Joss*. Interesting *outfit*. I think the slacks could be a nicer cut and the shoes are too manish, but you seem to *wear* it well."

Pursing his lips at the backhanded compliment, Joss glared at her. "Thanks, Ms. Ryan. Do you like the *cross*? It was a *Christmas* gift from my *Mom*." He smiled wickedly as he saw her wince at each emphasized word. "That and the formal *adoption* papers and legal name change. *Speaking* of which..." Pulling out his diploma, he smiled as he indicated the finely printed name. "Joss Vale Wright! Has a nice *ring* to it, *doesn't* it, Ms. Ryan?"

"I can see this was a waste of *time*, Fred." she fumed. "This isn't *my* child. My child is *dead*. She never came out of that *car wreck!*"

"Your *child* is standing right in *front* of you, Ms. Ryan." Joss stated flatly. "I'm the same person I *always* was, just free of *you!* I hated every *second* of being your *sweet princess*, Melanie! Get this through your thick skull. *I... Am... A... Boy! I... Always... Was!* And I believe *you* just violated the terms of you being here... calling me a *girl*."

"I did no such thing!" she argued.

"You said '*She* never came out of that car wreck', Mrs. Ryan." Judy pointed out, putting her hands defensively on Joss's shoulders. "Since the only ones *in* that accident were Joss and *my* daughter, unless you were trying to claim that *Grace* was your child, you were calling Joss a *girl*. The only girl *in* that accident was *Grace*! I think he's right. You *should* go. I don't know what *possessed* me to think you'd change or admit your abuse of your *son*! Go!"

"This isn't *your* house, *Ms. Wright*!" Melanie spat. "And Jocelyn will *never* be your daughter!" She jumped in a start when she heard Hank's voice from right behind her.

"You're *right*, Ms. Ryan." he boomed. "Jocelyn *will* never be Judy's daughter because no such person ever *existed*. Joss is Judy's *son*. This *is* however, *my* house and I think you need to go."

Glancing over at Joyce, Melanie looked back at Hank and made a final argument. "It's her house, *too*! Or do you think she has no say? I didn't see you consult *her* first!"

"He didn't *have* to, Mrs. Ryan." Joyce growled as most of the conversations in the room fell silent and Melanie turned to her. "He knows me well enough to know I agree! And even if I didn't, he knows I wouldn't make him put up with someone in *his* home as vile as *you*, so he doesn't *need* my permission!"

Seeing that she was going to get kicked out anyway, Melanie let loose with everything she had. "You all are *crazy*! Jocelyn is a *girl*! We can all *see* it! She looks, talks, moves, thinks, cries, and laughs like a girl! *Look* at her!" she gestured at Joss. "If you can look at that and see a boy, you're *crazy*! As for her believing in that sexist, homophobic, flying *spaghetti monster* in the *sky*, you all *brainwashed* her! I raised her to only believe in what you can *prove*! All objective analysis *proves* Jocelyn is a girl! You're all cruel, selfish, transphobic, *Nazis* that are shoving her back in the closet to protect your

sexist, cis-normative *prejudices*! You all would be lined up out in the street and *shot* if I had my way! The whole *lot* of you!" As she finished, her eyes were wild with fury.

Joss walked up to her and stared her down, now being an inch taller than her. "I *do* believe in what is provable, *Mrs. Ryan*." he snarled at her. "I can *prove* Judy loves me as a mother should, *unconditionally*. She supports what *I* want to be, not what *she* wants me to be, which proves that *you* love nothing but *yourself*! You're a mean, hateful, intolerant woman, *Mrs. Ryan*! If anyone here is a Nazi, it's *you*! After all, it's *you* who said you'd like to see us all *shot* over a difference of *opinion*!"

Glaring at the assembled people who looked at her harshly, she turned away in a huff. "*Come* on, Fred! Let's go!"

Fred glanced around the room with a hopeful expression. "If it's all the same to everyone *else* Mel, I'd like to stay and get to know my *son*."

Melanie spun around and scowled, the fury in her eyes boring into him. "*What!* After what he just *said* to me? *Fred!* He called me a hateful, intolerant, *Nazi!* I *can't* be a Nazi! I'm a *socialist!*"

Stepping back away from her, Fred shook his head and smiled. "You called Joss *him*, Mel. I think we had it wrong... *again*... and I think you *know* it."

"Don't *mansplain* to *me*, Fred!" she screamed wildly. "No man can *ever* tell a woman what she thinks! I... it was an *accident!* I didn't *mean* to say he! I wasn't misgendering him! *Her!* He just got me... I mean *she* just got me so infuriated that..."

Melanie was so busy explaining how she wasn't really misgendering Joss and rationalizing her intolerance that she didn't notice the knock on the door, or the new arrivals until she felt the tap on her shoulder. "*What!*" she yelled, spinning around to see the police officer standing right in front of her.

"*Ma'am?*" Officer Janice Woods said calmly. "The homeowner called us a few minutes ago to complain that you were trespassing on his property and refused to leave. You're disrupting this graduation celebration. Will you leave voluntarily?" When Melanie just stood there in shock for a moment, not moving, the woman hooked her hand around Melanie's arm and gripped it, pulling gently toward the front door. "*This way, ma'am.*"

Ripping her arm free and slapping the officer's hand away, Melanie spat in the officer's face. "Fascist *pig!* Don't *touch* me! I was leaving!"

Wiping the spittle from her cheek, Janice reached behind her and pulled her handcuffs out. "You're under arrest for assaulting an officer of the law and aggravated disorderly conduct." Moving quickly around Melanie, Officer Woods pulled the woman's arms behind her back and clapped the cuffs on, all the while Melanie spitting off a string of insults and threats.

"*Traitor!*" she screamed. "Defending the patriarchy and selling out women everywhere! Arresting *me* when I'm a mother protecting her *daughter!* You should arrest *these* people for *hate* crimes! Stupid *dyke!* You're twisting my arm! I'll have your job for *brutality!* *Fred!* Do something, you useless *prick!*"

While Janice frog-walked Melanie to the waiting squad car, reading the woman her rights with Melanie spewing hate the whole way, the other officer present took down the particulars.

"*OK*, so who is this *daughter* that she said she was trying to protect?" Officer Jim White asked, taking notes and looking around the room.

Joss stepped forward and cleared his throat. "She meant *me*, officer." he said with his head held high.

"You're her daughter?" he asked, expecting it to be a rhetorical question.

"*No*, sir." Joss answered, making Officer White look up in confusion.

"What's your *name*, miss?" he asked.

"*Mister* Joss Wright, sir." he answered clearly as he handed the officer his recently changed driver's license. "Mrs. Ryan *used* to be my mother."

Confused, he looked at the license and noted it stated Joss was male. "*You're* Joss Wright?" he asked incredulously, examining the feminine photo.

"*Yes*, Officer." Judy answered, putting her hand protectively on Joss's left shoulder. "I'm Joss's adopted mother, *Judy* Wright. Joss is my *son*."

After several minutes collecting information, he looked over at Fred. "Will you be following us down to the station then, Mr. Ryan?"

Pursing his lips, Fred shook his head. "*No*. She wasn't good enough to wait for me to be booked *last* year. She's a big girl. She can take care of herself." He glanced around the room, never having gotten the answer to his earlier inquiry. "That is, if I'm *welcome* to stay."

Hank turned to Joss with a questioning expression. "*Well*, Joss?"

Looking at his father, he smiled. "I'd be happy for you to stay... *Fred*."

Once the officers had left, the mood lightened significantly as kids went back to their own conversations. Sitting at the kitchen table, Joss talked with Fred while Judy sat next to her son.

"I got accepted into the Cleveland Institute of Art!" he boasted proudly as his father admired the oil painting of Grace that he'd given Judy, she having brought it with her in case Joss's parents wanted to see an example of his work. "I'm majoring in Painting with a minor in Graphic Design, just in case painting doesn't work out! I even got a *Merit* Scholarship! It's not *much*, but every little bit helps!"

Turning to Judy, Fred furrowed his brow. "You're not paying for his school?"

"I'm only a paralegal, Mr. Ryan. I don't make much money." Judy swallowed and glanced away embarrassedly. "At least he can still live at home while he goes to school, which *will* save on a lot of his costs." Then, with a sly expression, she pulled an envelope out of her purse. "However, I *do* have a graduation present for him!" Handing the envelope over to Joss, she smiled at him genuinely. "I am *so* proud of you, Joss!"

Taking and opening the envelope, his eyes widened before he turned and hugged Judy tightly. "Oh my *God*, Mom! You didn't have to do this! How can you *afford* it? Where did you *get* this?"

Fred looked at his son curiously. "*What? What is it?*" Seeing Joss hand him a check, he took it and read it. "Ten thousand dollars?" he asked, giving it back to his son while gazing at Judy.

"It's most of what's left from the settlement." she explained. Looking at Joss, her expression turned sad. "Consider it a gift from *Grace*, sweetheart." she stated, running her fingers through her son's short hair.

Fred smiled at the woman who'd become the mother his son deserved. "If he needs anything, *please* let me know." Turning to his son, he grimaced. "I have a lot to make up for. Maybe more than I can ever *repay*."

Taking a breath, he let it out slowly. "I... I'm *sorry*, Joss. I know that doesn't *mean* much now, but I hope you can forgive me someday. I should have listened to you and not let your..." He stopped himself and glanced back at Judy before turning his eyes back to Joss. "...not let *Melanie*... convince me that you were something you *weren't*. I should have *protected* you better."

Reaching a hand out, Joss watched as his father took it hesitantly. "Of *course* I forgive you... *Dad*." he sighed.

Surprised at the ease of his son's absolution, Fred blinked in confusion. "Don't get me wrong, Joss. I... I'm *grateful*, but... *why*?"

Fingering the cross he wore, he glanced up at Daniel who stood nearby and nodded back at him. The young man answered with a smile as he turned back to his father. "Because I was forgiven *my* mistakes, by Someone who had no good reason, other than the simple fact that He loved me, *unconditionally*!" Standing up, he waited for Fred to do likewise before embracing the confused man in a hug. "I *love* you, Daddy!"

Holding him in return, Fred relaxed into the moment and closed his eyes, remembering his son as he was when he was only a small boy and hugging him just as tightly. "I love you *too*, son."

Releasing his father, he returned to Judy and hugged her next. "I *love* you, Mom. *Thanks... for everything*!"

Also returning the embrace, Judy sighed contentedly. "Love you *too*, baby!"

With one arm still around her shoulders, Joss turned and looked around the room at the assembled people all smiling at him proudly. "I love you all *so much*!"

Epilogue

Joss sighed as he worked on the commission painting. Knowing it needed to be delivered within two weeks, he wanted it done that day so the oils had time to dry. Smiling as he shook his head, he continued to add details to the dog's ears. *Four years and a double degree and I'm using it to paint a rich woman's dead Airedale!* he chuckled to himself.

Taking a break, he stretched his back and exhaled just as he heard the bell ring, indicating someone had entered *Paintings and Portraits*, the unoriginal name of his business. In the three years following college, he'd worked for an advertising company doing graphic design, saving all his money to open his shop. He still did freelance work for them when business was slow, but painting was his true passion. He'd opened a little more than a year earlier, just a few months after he'd turned twenty-five. He enjoyed the free time it gave him to paint his own works and loved the joy he saw on people's faces when they saw their own classic portrait done so well.

Getting off his stool, he checked himself in the mirror before going to greet whoever had come into the shop. His shoulder-length light brown hair was still mostly styled well from that morning, though the man's red flannel shirt he wore over the plain white woman's tank top was stained with oil paint in a thousand places and his jeans were equally spattered with color. He still looked like a woman, nothing would change that short of massive amounts of plastic surgery he was hesitant to do solely for his vanity, but at least he was content to be himself, even if most people assumed he was a woman.

That fact helped Joss more than he liked to admit. When dealing with clients, them taking him to be a woman had given him opportunities he never would have had as a man. Some of his best clients were women who felt ill at ease around men, but Joss's feminine nature and appearance opened their doors, and wallets, to his business. His actual masculinity helped in those rare cases when the opposite was true, giving him options that he never could have had as strictly one or the other.

Walking out front, he entered his commercial gallery filled with dozens of his paintings on display. Many were landscapes that he sold most frequently, but he also had portraits on display to advertise his skill in that area. Seeing the skinny young woman with her back to him admiring his duplication of da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, he smiled and cleared his throat.

The young woman, startled by his sudden appearance, jumped slightly and turned around to face him, her long pale-blond hair spinning in front of her bright blue eyes before it fell over her right shoulder. "*Oh! You startled me! Do you work here?*" she asked, before realizing how dumb the question was.

Laughing, he nodded. "*Yes! I'm Joss. Interested in a painting or a portrait?*"

"*Painting.*" she answered, looking at him carefully. "I... um... I just moved in near here. The walls are a little bare! Not sure why I came in *here*... I was just sorta *drawn* to the place. It's *nice!*" Looking at him curiously, she tilted her head. "You said your name is *Joss?*"

"Joss Wright." he looked down. "Have anything *particular* in mind, *Miss*..."

"*Healy.*" she said, sounding disappointed. "Sorry, I just thought for a moment that you were someone I *knew* once, but his name was..."

"*Jennifer?*" he asked in shock.

"No, *Jocelyn.*" his first love answered. Slowly realizing he was addressing her, she arched her brows. "Wait... *what?* Oh *yes! I'm Jennifer!* How did..." Examining him carefully, her eyes went wide. "*Jocelyn?*"

Turning away, he cleared his throat. "Actually it's just *Joss* now. I changed my name... among *other* things. How are Vicky and John?"

Running up to him, she wrapped him in a desperate embrace, barely keeping her tears at bay. "My *God*, Joss! I didn't think I'd ever *see* you again!"

Holding her in return, he instantly recalled the scent of her, inhaling deeply and releasing a flood of memories, some terrible, others wonderful.

Jennifer stood back and looked at him, her eyes in shock at what she saw, but her hand still holding his. "Mom and Dad are *fine!* They're still in Akron with Luke. What *happened* to you, Joss?" she asked curiously.

"Long story." he smiled at her, his feminine voice lilting. "*Got* a few hours?"

Giggling as feelings for him resurfaced rapidly, she found herself blushing. "Um... not *now*, I'm just on lunch, but... are you busy for *dinner?*" Thinking, she remembered the last time they'd spoken, over ten years earlier, he'd found someone else. "That is, if you're *available?*" she probed, looking at the floor.

Smiling at her kindly, his own attraction for Jennifer back as though it had never gone, Joss nodded. "I'm *free*, Jenn. Are *you?*" Seeing the young woman nod her head slowly and smile back, he watched as she fished a necklace out from within her top and played with the chain.

"I'm *available.*" she said wistfully, glancing down to smile at the gold cross he wore that Judy had given him, before gazing into his eyes once more. "See, once upon a time, long ago, there was this *girl* I knew. We fell in love and I never really got over it. No one could ever measure up to *him.*"

Joss stared at the gift he'd given her so long ago, the two birthstones set one against the other, and felt lightheaded. "*Together Forever.*"

"*Together Forever.*" she sighed back as she looked at their joined hands and noticed that she hadn't let him go. *I don't think I ever really did!*

About the Author

Writer of three novels that study the human condition from a standpoint of Gender Identity, *Lost Faith*, *Every Day Is Your Last*, and her fictionalized autobiography *For God So Loved the World...*, Roberta Elder has crafted a much darker tale of twisted ideology in her latest novel, *The Road to Hell*.

Mrs. Elder was born in the summer of 1973 in Carson City, Nevada to a loving family who named her after a Great Uncle who'd recently passed on. Along with her older sister, she started life in a large family of dozens of aunts, uncles, cousins, great aunts, and grandparents.

Meeting and marrying her first wife in 1999, and meeting her second wife in 2006, she was finally able to transition from male to female in 2008 with the full support of both. All three were married together in a religious ceremony in 2016, and she does her best to maintain a healthy relationship with the two of them without showing favoritism or preference.

Showing an aptitude for math as a pre-teen, she's now a retired Statistical Data Analyst. Enjoying her early retirement, she currently spends her days with the complex calculus of household budgets, grocery shopping, young adult maintenance (raising two children), and the day-to-day cooking and cleaning of being a housewife, all on top of the writing she began in 2019.

Between being 'Wife and Mother', she finds time to spend with her mother, father, sister, brother-in-law, niece, nephews, and friends. In addition to writing, she enjoys old movies, black and white TV shows, dancing to 80's music, playing tabletop role-playing games and older computer games, target shooting, and discussing everything from theoretical physics to politics.

A staunch conservative libertarian, she most values her faith, family, friends, country, personal liberties, and her right to defend herself from oppression from those who would try to define or limit her based on who or what they think she is, who or what she should be, or what she should believe in.