

The Wisher's Paradox

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Walter Cocoran had a secret. Inside, she was Christina Joy Cocoran instead of the eleven-year-old boy everyone thought she was. In her quiet desperation, Christina tried to be the best girl possible. She did everything her parents told her to do, even the stupid boy things, and did them happily. Every night, she would pray that she would wake up a normal girl. The purity of her faith was noticed and she was given a choice; one that sent her life, and countless others, in a much different direction than she could ever have possibly imagined.

Set in Phoenix, Arizona in 2017, *The Wisher's Paradox* is a fantastic novella that acts as a catalyst for exploration of magical transgender transformations and the idea that the things that make us who we are and how others perceive us cannot be easily undone without unraveling the fabric of our own lives.

59,640 words

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Chapter 1 - The Wish

Looking around her room, Christina smiled. *Well, it's as clean as I can get it, anyway!* Wiping her hands together, she turned to leave the decidedly boyish bedroom, catching sight of herself in the mirror that was the door to her closet.

Her smile melted every time she saw herself. Instead of the tiny blonde girl she saw herself as, very much like her mother Ruth, 'Walter' was a tall husky boy with short brown hair like her father David. Pushing the depression away with a shake of her head, she forced herself to look again. It's not as though she were overweight. She was actually quite athletic, built just like her father who wouldn't look out of place as a linebacker for a professional football team. *Look on the bright side! You know who you are, you're doing good in school, you have lots of friends, and no pimples!* With a sigh, she headed out into the living room to vacuum before her mother got home from work.

No one asked her to do it. She did it so that her parents wouldn't have to. Moving the furniture was easy for her. Even at eleven, she was almost as big as her mother and, if her father were any measure of where her body was headed, she'd end up over six feet tall and a shade over two hundred pounds of easily obtained muscle. *Not exactly the girly type.* she mused with a giggle as she pushed the couch out of the way before running the vacuum over the exposed carpet.

Straightening up after cleaning, she looked around the room with a satisfied smile and headed back to her room to do her homework.

Writing her given name at the top of her paper, she couldn't help but sigh in mild sorrow. Ever since she was three years old and made her first friends, all other girls, she knew herself to be a girl like them. She enjoyed playing dolls, house, tea parties, and other games with the girls in her neighborhood. The few boys she'd met played games she couldn't understand. Army men and their pretend wars, cars, and other such games baffled her. It was her

best friend Kathy who'd given her the name Christina. Even a few years later though, her friend didn't even remember the name. She was 'Walt'.

It was then that she realized that she wasn't like the other girls. All too soon she'd realized that her body was a boy's body. Rather than turn sad or angry though, Christina was different. She was the eternal optimist and tried to just not let it bother her.

Shaking herself from the doldrums that threatened to take her, Christina put a smile on her face and dived into her English assignment.

Two hours later, Ruth Cocoran turned off the engine of her car and sighed exhaustedly before opening the door, letting the cool of the air-conditioned interior out and the ninety-three degree air in. Stepping out into the heat that had come down from almost a hundred degrees earlier that day, she was nearly sweating by the time she opened the front door, carrying the bag of groceries in with her.

"Walt!" she shouted from the entryway as she kicked the front door closed behind her. "I'm *home*, sweetie!"

Bounding out into the living room like an excited puppy, Christina ran up to her mother happily. "Welcome home, Mother!" Taking the groceries from her arms, the oversized girl beamed as though she hadn't seen her in days, even though it had only been since breakfast that morning. "Let me help you with that! How was work?"

It was the same as most afternoons for Ruth, so the behavior didn't seem at all out of place to the accountant, mother, and wife. "Work was *fine*, sweetie. How was *school*?" Even as she asked, she was kicking off her shoes while Christina took the food to the kitchen.

"School was OK." the girl answered noncommittally as she began to put the newly purchased food in the refrigerator. "*Oh!* You should have *seen*

the outfit *Kathy* wore today! I can't *believe* that her mom let her wear a top that didn't even cover her *midriff*! I gave her a *bit* of a hard time about it! You could almost see her *bra*, it was so short!"

Shaking her head as she put her briefcase next to the desk she used at home, Ruth arched a brow at Christina's revelation. "Given how *hot* it was today, I almost *envy* her! Ah, to be *young* again!"

Stopping her self-assigned chore, Christina leaned out of the kitchen back into the living room and looked at her with eyes wide. "*Mother!*"

"Oh, *Walt!*" she retorted. "I was a girl of the *eighties*, sweetie! We *invented* the bare midriff!"

Her turn to shake her head, Christina resumed her task. "Well, *I* think it's a little too *risqué*, if you ask *me*! I mean, I'm not *judging* her for it, but *still*."

Biting her lip to repress her desire to correct her child for talking so much like a girl, Ruth closed her eyes and took a breath. No matter how long Christina had been acting so femininely, which was over six years that the woman could tell for certain, she just couldn't get used to it coming from such an obvious looking boy. "I'm going to hop in the shower before I start dinner, sweetie. Thank you for putting away the groceries for me. You didn't *have* to, you know."

"I know!" Christina replied cheerily. "I'm *happy* to help, Mother! Enjoy your shower! I need to get back to my English paper... unless you'd like *me* to cook dinner *for* you?"

"No!" Ruth almost snapped. "That is, you should focus on your school work. Let *me* take care of dinner, sweetheart. Alright?"

"OK, Mother!" Christina chirped as she almost skipped back to her room.

Heading into the master bathroom, Ruth tried not to read too much into her child's feminine behavior. At first it had worried both her and David, to the point that they'd had Christina genetically tested to verify she was in fact a male and not misidentified at birth. The test had come out as expected; she was a perfectly normal boy *physically*, but her personality was *definitely* female. When she and David had talked to her about it with open minds, they still didn't get anywhere. She could still remember the conversation.

Ruth looked at her five-year-old eating lunch after school a week following the doctor's visit. "Honey? Your daddy and I want to ask you something."

Trying to be supportive, David Cocoran nodded. "Listen to your mommy, Walt. It's important, OK?"

Seeing that they were serious, Christina's eyes widened and she put down her glass of milk. "OK, Daddy. I'm listening."

Gathering her courage, she asked, "Honey? Your daddy and I want to help, so please be honest. Do you know why you don't act like the other boys?"

Biting her lower lip, Christina slowly shook her head. "No."

With Ruth frustrated on that front, David took a turn. "Walt? Do you know why you do act like the girls in your Kindergarten class?"

Suddenly happy and animated, Christina smiled at him. "Oh! You mean like Kathy and Rachel and Lindsey and Beth and Sharon and..."

"Yes!" he interrupted her. "Like them! Don't you have any boys that are your friends?"

Thinking hard, Christina shook her head. "Nuh uh. They all play dumb games and aren't any fun! Robert even pushed Kathy on the playground and called her a dumb girl, and boy did he get it when I told teacher!"

Looking at one another knowingly, they both recognized the way she'd answered and sighed, having been warned by Walt's pediatrician that she might have gender issues. Knowing they had to ask the inevitable, Ruth waited for David to nod before turning to Christina. "Honey? Do... do you think you're a girl?"

Hearing them ask, Christina swallowed hard. Of course she felt like she should be a girl. She always had for as long as she could remember, which was at least the last two years. However, she also knew that she was a boy on the outside and that nothing short of a miracle would change that, for she wasn't just a boy, she was a masculine-looking one, even at five. Being a practical girl, she just accepted the inevitable, without anyone telling her she should, that she was a boy and could never change it. Shaking her head slowly, Christina did her best to answer her mother's question.

"No. I know I'm a boy. Girls are... different."

Stymied, but partially relieved, the parents pressed her for hours as to why she acted so much like a girl, but the only answer they could ever get from Christina was that she knew she was a boy, but just didn't like boy things.

Stepping out of the shower, Ruth dried herself off before throwing on a light summer dress that would keep her cool in the heat of the evening. For six years she'd watched Christina become more and more feminine, all the while insisting that she was a boy. They'd taken her to see a child psychologist at six, but all he could tell them was the same thing Christina kept insisting, that she was a boy, despite her naturally feminine behavior. Even speaking to their pastor, Reverend Brookes, didn't produce any answers.

Afraid that Christina might be gay and fearing the troubled life it would bring her due to the intolerance of others, they'd had a delicate talk with her at age seven, asking if she liked boys, fully prepared to support her no matter what she said. Remembering her response made Ruth giggle lightly. *He looked*

so cute sticking his tongue out and going "Blech! Boys are gross! No way would I marry a boy! I am a boy!"

Fixing the spaghetti she'd planned for the evening meal, she heard her husband's car pull up the driveway and the motor die into the background noise of the air conditioner keeping the house cool. Smiling, she shouted, "*Walt! Your father's home! Dinner in fifteen! Go wash up!*"

"OK, Mother!" she shouted from her room as she finished putting her work in her backpack for the next school day. Hurrying to the front door, she opened it just as her father was reaching for the doorknob. "*Daddy!*" she shouted, hugging him with all the considerable strength in her.

"Ugh!" David groaned at the bear hug his child wrapped him in. No small man at six-foot-two and well over two hundred pounds of well-toned muscle, his eleven-year-old child's robust stature only a foot shorter and her growing strength made him wince.

"*Sorry, Daddy!*" Christina giggled. "Did you have a good day?"

Stepping in and closing the door behind him, her father nodded curtly. "It was alright. I had a sales review, but don't worry about your old man! He can whip the rest of the salesmen on the lot with his eyes closed!" Throwing a fake punch at Christina, he smiled at her playfully.

Shying away from the punch and pulling back to defend herself the way he'd taught her, Christina giggled and put her fists up in mock combat, but threw her father for a loop with her words. "*Daddy! No fair! I wasn't ready!*"

Putting his fists down, he sighed as his smile melted. "OK, sport. I'm going to go take this monkey suit off and *you* need to get cleaned up for dinner!"

Moving in quickly, Christina hugged him again before he could stop her and smiled as she stepped back. "*OK, Daddy! I'll be quick!*" Racing off to

the bathroom, she tried to be happy with her lot in life. *So I'm not Daddy's little girl! I know he loves me! What more can a daughter ask for?*

A quarter hour later the three sat down for dinner together at the table as usual, the three joining hands while David said the prayer of thanks as he did every night. Once more with her head bowed in pure faith, Christina's thoughts turned to God. *I do thank you for everything I have, God... but... well... you know. Please?* As her father and mother said "Amen." she joined them with a smile and the three enjoyed their meal.

Once dinner was done, Christina went off and took her shower while her father cleaned the dinner dishes and her mother relaxed to pick a movie they could watch together. The evening seemed no different than any other as Christina sat in her boy's plain gray pajamas on the couch between her loving parents watching *Angels in the Outfield*, one of her favorites.

In truth, even though she was a girl of eleven, Christina believed in angels. She even still believed in Santa, though she was beginning to doubt that he was a real physical person, but more of a way of life everyone should live. It's why she tried so hard to do everything her parents told her, and *then* some. She knew that the angels were watching and that the only way she would ever get her heart's desire was to be as good as possible.

She did far more than they ever asked. She had nearly perfect grades, was never tardy, would never *consider* skipping school, refrained from using bad words, even when her parents weren't around, and in all ways tried to be the perfect little lady. Even when her father signed her up for football, she smiled and threw herself into the task, trying to be the best player she could be, even though she disliked the game. It made him happy, so she tried.

Even as the three watched the movie, they were unaware that they too were being watched by unseen eyes.

When at last the movie ended, Christina stretched and got up. "Thanks for the movie, Mom! I know you guys must *hate* it by now! I must have seen that at *least* a dozen times!"

"Just this *year*!" David joked.

"Oh, *Daddy*!" she almost whined. "I'm not *that* bad!" Reaching down she hugged him, careful not to overdo it this time.

Returning the hug, David was surprised when she kissed him on the cheek. He needn't have been as she'd been doing so every night of her life, but the action still seemed so at odds with his child's physique and insistence that she was a boy. "G'night, sport!" he said. "Sweet dreams and God bless!"

Hugging her mother gently, Ruth also received a kiss on the cheek. "Goodnight, Mother! See you in the morning!"

"Night, sweetheart!" she answered back before Christina had her hair petted by the woman. "Want me to tuck you in?"

"No." she sighed. "It's *fine*, Mother. I'm a big... boy!"

Hardly noticing the slight hitch in her only child's reply, Ruth smiled and nodded. "OK, baby. Goodnight and God bless!"

Heading for her room, Christina smiled weakly to herself. *I gotta watch that! I almost called myself a girl!* She knew her parents were concerned about her feminine behavior. She wasn't *that* naive, but felt that she needed to keep it from them so they wouldn't worry. *Not like there's anything they could do about it, anyway.* She'd tried acting less girly, but no matter what it just came out. Closing her bedroom door behind her, the hair bristled on the back of her neck as she looked around the silent room cautiously, feeling like she was being watched for a moment. Seeing no one there, she relaxed and turned down her covers before kneeling next to her bed.

God? It's Christina. Same thing as always! I know! You must get tired of hearing me ask for the same thing every night for seven years straight, but if it would be OK... would you make me a girl when I wake up? Please? I'm really trying to accept being stuck in a boy's body. I know there isn't much I can do about that because the body you gave me is just never gonna look girly no matter what I do, but I know you could change me to fit the inside!

I'm still trying to be the best girl I can be, just like I promised! Even if the answer's no, it's OK, though. I still love you and love the family you gave me! I'm sure if I told Mother or Daddy that I wanted to be a girl they would try and help me be one, but you know how that would work! I'd still look like a boy, no matter what clothes I wore or even if I wore makeup and had my long blonde hair! Anyway... please? Can I be a girl? I love you! Amen!

Climbing into her bed, she still couldn't shake that feeling of being watched. It scared her more than she even wanted to admit to herself. Sliding under her covers, she almost felt like hiding under them or pulling her pillow over her head. Trying to settle her nerves, she took a breath and tried to ignore the feeling until sleep claimed her.

Ruth dragged the brush through her hair after having washed it and blown it dry while David brushed his teeth and settled into bed. "David? Did you notice anything *unusual* about Walt tonight?"

Putting down the book he'd started reading, David looked toward the open door of the bathroom. "Hmm. Now that you *mention* it, *yes*." he agreed thoughtfully. "He seemed..." Searching for the words, he was at a total loss how to describe it. "*Huh*. I can't put my finger on it, but *yes*... there was *something* different."

Frustrated that he'd had no better a time recognizing the difference than she had, Ruth began angrily pulling the brush through her hair. "I don't know *either*! Just something... *off*... you know? Like he was... *sad*? No! *That's* not

it! Um... maybe... *content*? If I didn't *know* better, I'd *swear* that he was..." Putting the brush down, she regarded herself in the mirror with a stunned look. "*David!* Do you think he might have a... a *girlfriend*?"

Sitting up, David thought back to Christina's behavior during dinner and the movie. Furrowing his brow, he pursed his lips and thought hard. "Well, he *does* have quite a *few* girlfriends, but I assume you mean something *more* than the girls that he's *friends* with?"

Coming out of the bathroom and snapping off the light as she did so, Ruth's brow was similarly bunched as his own. "Yeah, that's what I *meant*, but... no... it's... it's something *else* that I just can't put my finger on. He almost seemed... *smaller*. Not *physically*, I mean... I mean *emotionally*. Like he was giving something up that he used to *like*. You know?"

"Not *really*, no!" David laughed. "But I *suppose* I can see that." Pausing a moment, he was about to continue when he had an eerie feeling crawl up his spine. "*Shhh!*" he whispered.

"What's *wr...*" Ruth began, only to be shushed again as her husband got out of bed and silently retrieved his Smith and Wesson revolver from the nightstand.

Opening the cylinder, he loaded all six chambers with the deadly copper-jacketed hollow-point ammunition, ready to put down any intruder that might threaten his family. Flicking the weapon to the right with his wrist, the cylinder clicked into place as he crept up on the bedroom door, listening beyond it cautiously. The last thing in the world he wanted to do was shoot another human being, but he would if he *had* to in defense of his family.

Seeing David spooked was rare for Ruth. He'd only ever acted like this once before, shortly after they'd brought Walt home from the therapist and one of the front windows had been shattered while they'd slept. It had just been mischievous teens then, but it was enough of a scare that he'd bought the gun

the next day. She wanted to stick close to him, but knew that if he needed to defend his family, the last thing he needed was her clinging to his back.

Slowly, David opened the bedroom door and peered out into the darkened hallway that led to the living room. Edging his way down the hall, he noted that Christina's door was open a crack. Nudging it open with a shoulder, he quickly swept the room with his eyes to see if there was anyone threatening his child. Seeing her sleeping form breathing slow and deep and covered head to toe under blankets, he moved throughout the rest of their home cautiously, making sure that no one could be hiding anywhere and that all the doors and windows were in fact locked.

After an interminable wait, Ruth heard him coming back down the hall at a normal pace, the sound of their child's door being closed before he returned to their bedroom as he closed the door behind him with a look of relief.

"What *was* it, David?" she begged.

"*Nothing!*" he chuckled. "I was *sure* that I heard someone moving around the house for a moment, but there's no one *there* and we're locked up *tight*, so..."

"...so you were just being *paranoid*?" she joked.

"*Cautious.*" he corrected her as he unloaded and returned the revolver to the drawer. "*Believe* me. I take my responsibilities as a father and husband *seriously.*" Settling back into bed, David shook his head to try to clear the odd feeling he couldn't shake, but just ended up ignoring it. "I *worry.*"

"About *what*?" Ruth asked nervously as she climbed into the bed next to him.

"About ignorant fools thinking that just because Walt is... well... *delicate*, that he would make a good *target.*" he admitted. "I won't *let* anyone hurt him... *or* you... out of ignorance, fear, or *hate.*"

While the two talked quietly to one another, in the next room Christina was dreaming of her one wish coming true. As she did, Lisbeth looked down on her with a gentle smile and watched her beautiful dream unfold. With a slow blink, she sighed at the simple desires of the poor girl trapped in a body that was so unlike her true self; the small thin blonde that matched the girl's soul.

Dear Christina! she spoke into the girl's dream in the only way possible for her to communicate, as pure thought. *You are such an innocent and beautiful girl! Your faith is pure, unselfish, and trusting in the Creator's wisdom, not your own. You don't know how rare a gift that is! Tonight it is seven years to the day that you first made your promise to the Creator that you would be the best girl you knew how to be! You have kept your promise and the Creator remembers it! The Creator has decided that you are deserving of an even more precious gift... that of choice.*

Christina was standing in the middle of a field of wildflowers. The sun was warm on her skin through the thin fabric of her white floral sundress as her long blonde locks tickled gently across her shoulders in the light breeze. As she looked around, she saw the beautiful woman looking at her and smiling, the words she spoke without moving her lips simply appearing in her mind.

"Who... who are you?" she asked nervously.

A friend! Lisbeth thought to the girl. *My name is Lisbeth. You people give us so many wonderful names, though! Spirit, fairy, elf, fay, genie, nymph..., but you Christina, you would call me an angel.*

Her breath caught as she looked at the woman who seemed no different than any person she'd ever met, save that she was uncommonly beautiful and could speak to her wordlessly. Swallowing hard, she looked at the creature and stepped closer cautiously. "W-what *choice* am I being given?"

The choice to accept or deny your heart's greatest desire. Lisbeth told her with a gentle smile. *Do you accept it? I must warn you, it may not be all*

you hope it to be. You need not accept. You're old enough now to know that decisions have consequences. This one is no different.

Suddenly realizing that the woman was offering to give her a girl's body to go with her girl's soul, her eyes went wide. "W-what? How can I say *no*? I mean, is there a *downside*? Will I still *look* like a boy or something?"

Laughing gently, Lisbeth's mouth still never opened. *No! You will look as you do here. It is the image the Creator gave you to soothe your aching soul. It is what you would have looked like, what you will look like if you accept this gift, a mix of your mother and father. Are you so vain it would matter?*

Smiling, Christina shook her head. "No! Not *really*! I mean, it's *nice* to be pretty, but I just want to be a *girl*! I don't *care* what else! Just being able to be called *Christina* instead of *Walt* all the time! Oh, to be able to wear a dress when I want to feel pretty, or grungy sweats when I'm grumpy? *Yes!*"

With a slow nod, Lisbeth arched her brows. *I give you this last chance to refuse. Once done, it cannot be undone. Are you sure you don't have any questions you would ask first before you decide? I will answer truthfully.*

Trying to think of any possible downsides, Christina narrowed her eyes. "Will... will making me become a girl make me like *boys*?"

Shaking her head, an almost mischievous grin crossed her lips. *No! Not even an angel can change who you are. You will love as you would have in your old body, for it will still be you. To change that about you would be to kill you and replace your soul with someone that is just similar to you. Only the Creator can create new life. It is not within our power to grant such a wish. Your body is not you. It does not control your heart.*

Trying to think of anything else, Christina could barely contain herself. "Yes! I *accept* His gift! *Please!* Make me a girl!"

You always have been one, Christina. Lisbeth admonished. Your body is just a vessel for your soul, which has always been just as you are here. I know your simple words are so limited that they fail to capture what you truly mean even part of the time, but I know your heart's desire... that your body should reflect your soul. It shall be. From this day forward you will have a girl's body which will grow into a woman's body as though it had always been yours. Nothing else will change. You will still be yourself and your promise will still be held by the Creator as the gift you offered freely. Now rest and sleep. When you awaken, it will be done. Goodbye, Christina! Go with the love of the Creator!

Suddenly very sleepy, which she felt was odd for this being a dream, the girl lay down in the wildflowers and her eyes closed; the last thing she saw being the beautiful woman fading from view.

In her bedroom, Lisbeth stood watch over Christina as her body slowly transformed over the course of hours. It could have been instantaneous, but Lisbeth wanted to ensure that the process was painless and natural, allowing time for her system to acclimate as her body shrank, her hair lengthened and turned a golden fair, her bones shifted, and a womb grew in her body.

When at last it was done, the sun was nearing the horizon and an alarm clock buzzed from the next room where Christina's parents slept. With a shake of her head and a sad expression, Lisbeth sighed in sorrow for the girl. *You poor creature. You did not have the experience or forethought to ask the needed questions. It will be hard on you, little one. Harder than you ever thought possible. Far easier a time you would have had would you have turned down the gift and just showed your parents who their daughter is. I do not know why the Creator offered the gift to you, or why I could not counsel one as young as you without you asking. Still, you may yet persevere. May the Creator watch over you, dear one! You are going to need it!*

At that, Lisbeth vanished from sight, even as the girl's father crawled out of bed to get ready for work.

Chapter 2 - Unforeseen Consequences

Stirring slightly, Christina was in the wonderful middle ground between dreaming and waking, still not fully conscious, but no longer asleep. *God, that was a beautiful dream!* she mused sleepily. *It all felt so real!*

"Walt!" Ruth shouted from just beyond the door. "Time to get up!"

Hearing the name she'd fallen asleep to, Christina sighed frustratedly. Still, she put a smile on her face and sat up. *Could be worse! She might have...*

Pausing mid-thought, Christina immediately knew something was wrong. Her boy's pajamas sat on her body like a circus tent. She couldn't even find her hands as they were lost somewhere up the sleeves. Shaking her head to clear it, she shrieked when tangles of blonde curls flew into her face and mouth. Spitting to try and dislodge the wayward strands from her teeth, she tried wiping them away with the sleeves of her gray PJs.

Hearing a mild "Eep!" from her child's room, Ruth did a double take at the closed door when she realized it was the voice of a girl. Knocking, Ruth tried to decide if she should just barge in or give Walt a moment, possibly to keep her from seeing something very embarrassing involving him and a girl.

"Walt!?" she patiently yelled through the door. "Walt, I'm coming in!"

When her mother walked in the door, Christina was still trying to get the hair out of her face and pull the sleeves of her pajamas up until her hands were free. "M... Mother?" Even as the word escaped her lips, she couldn't recognize it as her own voice.

Seeing a girl in Walt's bed, wearing the very same pajamas that her son had worn to bed the night before, Ruth's mind went straight to the first place a parent's thoughts would go in such circumstance. It didn't involve angels.

Ruth screamed.

Still shaving in the bathroom, the sound of his wife's voice raised in fear and shock made him drop the electric razor, its head shattering as it crashed into the porcelain sink. Ignoring his ruined appliance, David ran for his child's bedroom to find out what had terrified his wife so much that she'd sounded as though she'd discovered a body, and hoping that he was wrong in that estimation. "What!?! Ruth! What's wrong?"

Even as her father rushed in to stand next to her mother, Christina had finally freed her hands from her oversized sleeves and saw the tiny fingers and hands that only ten hours earlier had been meaty and strong. Now they felt like toothpicks as she tried to use them to get the hair out of her eyes and mouth as she turned to see the shocked expressions of her parents.

"*Walt!*" Ruth finally managed to shout as she couldn't take her eyes off the intruder in her home. "Walt, get out here *right now!*" Tearing her eyes away from the girl, Ruth began scouring the room for where her child might be hiding. "*WALTER DEVON COCORAN!* You get *out* here this *instant* and *explain* yourself!"

Slowly catching up to what was going on, David was stunned at the sight of an eleven-year-old girl in his child's bed and wearing the nightclothes 'he' had worn to bed, appearing to him as though she'd just managed to get the top on before he came in. "Oh *God!*" It was all he could say before turning to look away and provide the girl some sense of modesty.

Losing her patience, Ruth began tearing through Christina's room, flinging open closet doors, looking under the bed, and even opening dresser drawers, as ridiculous as that seemed to be later. "*Walter!* Come *out*, damn you!" Ruth considered herself a modern woman and good and patient mother. She could accept that Christina had sneaked a pre-teen girl into her room overnight, and even that the two might well have had sex, but her child was now hiding

and trying to pretend it had never happened, which was making her more and more angry by the second.

Even as her parents lost their minds, Christina lost hers and she could only stare in stunned shock at her tiny hands. "D... d... *Daddy!*?" she finally managed to eke out as terror gripped her throat.

Clearing his throat, David furrowed his brow and addressed the strange girl. "You... your daddy isn't here, young lady. You're in our *son's* house... in *his* bedroom... in his *bed*."

Sure now that Walt was nowhere in the room, Ruth ran out to search the rest of the house. "*Walt!*" she screamed. "*Wherever* you are, you get your fanny *out* here and *explain* why there's a *girl* in your *bed!*"

Hearing her mother scrambling around the house looking for her, Christina slowly looked over at her father, her eyes wide in fear. "*Daddy?*"

Crossing his arms, David shook his head. "No. I'm *Walt's* father, *David*. Do you wear *glasses*? Where did you put them before you... um..." The man couldn't bring himself to say '*before you climbed into bed with Walt.*' It was too big a shock, given his child's innocent nature.

Now in shock that her own father didn't know her, Christina began to cry. "Oh, *Daddy!*" She tried to say more, but the wracking sobs kept her from being even slightly coherent.

Seeing the poor girl reduced to tears and wanting her father, David was torn. He wanted to comfort this strange girl who obviously was something special to his child, but at the same time he knew it would be inappropriate to even get within arm's reach of her. Examining the room that his wife had just torn apart searching for Christina, David started looking himself, this time for the girl's clothes that he determined she must have worn to come into their home. *It must have been her that I heard last night.* he told himself.

Meanwhile, Ruth was at her wit's end where else to look for her wayward child. Reduced to near hysterics, she forced herself to calm down and lower her voice as she walked around the house and talked to the walls.

"Walt? It's Mother. It's *OK*, sweetheart! I *promise* I'm *not* going to *hit* you or *spank* you! We just want to *talk* to you, *OK*? *Please* come out! You can *always* talk to us about *anything*! You *know* that! We're not *mad*! We're just... we're *frightened* for you! That poor *girl* you left alone in your room is frightened, *too*! *Walt*! This is no way for a... a *man* to behave! *Walter*!"

Hearing his wife getting nowhere, and not having any luck in finding the girl's lost clothing, David moved to the door. "Ruth! Honey? Would you come here, please?" As soon as she was near enough, David lowered his voice. "Let's switch. Maybe *I* can find Walt and *you* can find the young lady's clothes? I can't even *talk* to her without her breaking into hysterics and wanting her father!" As he was about to leave, he paused and added, "Oh, I think she wears glasses. She thought *I* was her father."

Nodding in understanding, Ruth entered Christina's room cautiously while David left to search the house. Seeing the girl sobbing uncontrollably on her child's bed, there was something almost familiar about it, reminding her of times when Christina was young and would wake up with a nightmare. Her instinct to help a hurt child overcame her discomfort with the idea that this girl had slept with her son and she approached the wailing girl.

"*Shhh!* It's *alright*, dear!" she soothed, moving close enough to rest a hand on her shoulder, not wanting to scare the girl more. "We're not *mad*, dear! You don't have to be *scared*! No one's going to *hurt* you, *OK*? *Shhh!*"

Hearing her mother's soothing voice made Christina need to feel the woman's embrace. "Oh, *Mother!*" she cried as she turned and latched onto her like a life preserver, sobbing as she tried to bring her emotions under control. *Why is it so hard to stop crying?* she wondered.

Having the strange girl call her 'Mother', and then cling to her as though she were, unnerved Ruth. After a moment she wrapped her arms around the girl and tried to calm her. "It's *alright*, dear! You're *safe*, OK? Do you think you can calm down enough to tell me your *name*?"

Pulling back slightly, she regarded her mother through tear-stained eyes. "It... it's *me*, Mother! *Christina*!" she burred between sobs, unaware of her own *faux pas*.

Pulling the girl into a supportive embrace, Ruth furrowed her brow in confusion. "A... Alright. Your name's *Christina*. I'm Ruth, *Walt's* mother. David is my husband and *Walt's father*. He said you might need your glasses. Do you know where they are?" She glanced around the ruined room briefly, hoping to spot them without releasing the girl to resume her wailing.

Confused, Christina pulled away again and tried to compose herself. "I... I know who you *are*, Mother! I don't need *glasses*! I never have *before*!"

"Why do you keep calling me *Mother*? I'm not *your* mother, sweetie! I'm *Walt's* mother! You're *confused*! It's *OK*! It's *understandable*! You... you were *scared* and *surprised*! Take a *good* look at me, OK Christina?"

Hearing her secret name spoken aloud finally made her realize that her parents had no way of knowing who Christina even *was*, let alone that she was also Walter. Thinking of all the stories she'd read where a girl like her gets magically changed to have a girl's body, the whole world had always changed so that she was instantly accepted as one as though it had always been so. *Isn't that what the angel said would happen?* she wondered. *Yeah! She said, 'you will have a girl's body, which will grow into a woman's body as though it had always been yours.'* Looking into her mother's eyes, her sad and scared expression dissolved into a giddy smile. "I... I'm a *girl*!"

Seeing the stranger happily state the obvious in such a simple way made her back away slowly, thinking the girl must be slightly crazed. "Um... of *course* you're a girl, Christina. What's your *last* name?"

Rolling her eyes at her mother, the giddy girl giggled. "The same as *yours*, silly! *Cocoran!*"

Still backing away, Ruth shook her head. "No! You... you're too *young* to have married Walt! Playing pretend is *fun*, but your name is still the same as it was before you *met* him, dear. What *is* it?"

Her smile fell as she saw that her mother wasn't getting it. "*No*, Mother! You don't underst..."

"I'm not your *mother*, Christina!" Ruth nearly shouted before calming herself once more. "You... you aren't my Walt's *wife*, so I'm not your *mother*! I'm only *his* mother! Where are your *clothes*?"

"My *clothes*?" she pondered curiously. "In the *closet*, of course!"

Moving to look, the woman saw no girl's clothes there at all. "I don't *see* them. Do... do *you*?"

Pointing at her shirts that hung in the closet, Christina sighed in exasperation. "*There!* Those *are* my clothes, Mother! I'm *Walt!*"

The stunned expression on Ruth's face was a pale shadow of the stunned feeling in her heart. *The poor girl's insane!* she told herself.

Even as Christina said the words, David was nearing the bedroom once more. Sure that he must have misheard, he knocked before entering. "Safe to come in, love?"

Nodding absently, Ruth took a moment before she realized he couldn't see her. "Y... yes, David. It's safe... I *think*."

Frustrated that her mother didn't seem to believe her, Christina was about to get up off the bed when she felt her pajama bottoms and boxer shorts start to fall off her much smaller hips. Grabbing them quickly before she flashed her parents and sent them screaming from the room to call the cops, the girl just sat quickly, suddenly very aware of the changes to her anatomy within the loose boxers. The thought made her giggle once more like a mad girl.

"David? Any *luck*?" Ruth asked, never taking her eyes off their seemingly insane intruder.

He shook his head ruefully. "No. The doors and windows are all still locked and the chains are still set on all the doors, so if he left the house, she locked up *after* him... which means he's been gone since before we got up."

"I'm right *here*, Daddy!" the girl cried petulantly. "I'm *Walter*! Or at least... I *was* before last night."

Looking over at his wife, he saw Ruth nod with eyes wide. "That's what she told me once already, David... after telling me at first that her name is Christina... Christina *Cocoran* of all things!"

Stepping closer to his wife defensively, he looked at the strange girl sternly. "Now see here young lady! Enough is *enough*! Where has our *son* gone? When did he leave the *house*? What's your *real* name?"

Now scared that her own parents might throw her out with nowhere to go, Christina began to panic. "Mother!? Daddy!? I *am* Walt! Ask me *anything*! I can *prove* I'm your daughter!"

"We don't *have* a daughter!" David barked. "We have a *son*! This sick joke has gone on long enough! Where is *Walt*?"

Now sobbing again, Christina was near to hysterics. "*Please! You've got to believe me! I'm Walter! I'm your son! I... I always wanted to be a girl and last night I got my wish! It wasn't supposed to be anything like this! This is supposed to be the happiest day of my life! Now I feel like I'm going to lose everything! Please! Tell me you still love me, Daddy!*"

Seeing the girl close to a total breakdown, David stepped away from his wife. "Stay with her, love. I'm going to call the authorities and get it straightened out just who this girl really *is!*"

"*No!*" Christina screamed. "*Daddy, please! Don't do that! They'll lock me up, thinking I'm crazy!*"

"You're not *well*, dear." Ruth offered sympathetically. "You need *help* and we need to know where our *son* is!"

As David left the room to use the phone, Christina tried to get up again and chase after him, but the baggy bottoms of Walt's old pajamas tripped her up and sent her crashing to the floor before Ruth could catch her, sending her back into black unconsciousness.

When at last she regained consciousness, she was looking up at her mother's concerned face as the woman kneeled over her. "*Mother?*"

"*No*, Christina. I'm *Ruth Cocoran*. Are you OK?"

"I... I *think* so." she replied. "My head hurts."

"You took a nasty tumble, dear." Ruth explained. "Walt's pajamas... um... don't *fit* you very well."

"I know." she sighed frustratedly. "I thought becoming a girl would be a dream come *true*, but it's turning into a *nightmare!* I just want to wake up

back in my *old* body! At least *then* you'd know it was *me* and wouldn't send me *away*!"

Concern still marring her normally lovely features, Ruth looked closely at the girl. "You really *do* think you're Walt, *don't* you? This isn't just some *game* you two are playing at, *is* it?"

"Of *course* it isn't, Mother!" she nearly cried. "How can I *prove* it to you?"

"I don't believe you *can*, Christina." Ruth admitted. "This is the *real* world. People don't magically change genders *overnight*! You don't even *look* like Walt! Your hair and eyes are *both* wrong! My Walt has brown hair and green eyes. Yours are blonde and blue."

"Just like *you*." Christina pointed out sadly. "It... it's how I always *imagined* myself... being as pretty as *you*, Mother."

Hearing the way she spoke sent an eerie shiver down her spine. *Her speech and way of talking sounds so much like Walt!* she shivered. *She must go to school with him and listened to him for a long time.* Her heart went out to the poor girl. "It's alright, Christina. You... you're *very* pretty. I'll bet Walt really *likes* you! Do... do you know where he *went*? *Please* tell me, dear! You're *scaring* me!"

Beginning to cry again, Christina closed her eyes and tried to will herself to wake up back in her old body with the love of her parents waiting for her. Then she would tell them her secret right way. Tears fell down the side of her face and into her small ears that looked exactly the same as David's. Then remembering what Lisbeth told her, that her new image was a blend of her mother and father, she tried to calm herself.

"M... Mrs. Cocoran?" she stopped herself from calling her Mother as she sat up. "Will you do something for me?"

"Of *course*, dear!" the woman offered.

"Look at me *really* closely. Don't you *see* it? I look like you and *Daddy*!"

With a patient sigh, she humored the girl. "Well, now that you *mention* it, you *do* look a little like *I* did at your age... and those ears and nose look *so* much like your fath... I mean... like Mr. *Cocoran's*."

Hearing the Freudian slip, Christina sat up in hope. "*See*? I'm your *daughter*! I mean... your *son*! I mean..."

"It's *OK* dear!" Ruth tried to soothe her once more. "Don't try and sit up, alright? You might have a concussion. Try to lie back and don't *talk*, OK?"

"But I have to *convince* you!" she nearly cried. "Before the *cops* come and haul me away to the *loony* bin... or wherever it is that they send *runaways*!"

"You're a *runaway*?" Ruth caught her out. "*Ah*! So *that's* why you're scared of us calling the police! Are you ready to tell me your *real* name now?"

"*No*!" she protested. "I mean, no, you don't *understand*! If the *cops* come and you turn me over to *them*, I only have two choices! Tell the truth about who I am and get locked up for people thinking I'm *crazy*, or tell them *nothing* and get locked up on suspicion of me being a *runaway*, which is what they'd *have* to assume is the reason I won't tell them my name! *Please* Mother! Don't let them take me *away*! I *love* you so *much*!"

Listening to the girl try to dig her way out of the slip of the tongue, then hearing her words dissolve into wracking sobs once more, Ruth wished there was some way she could help her.

Just then, David came back in. "The police are on their way, along with an ambulance." he said calmly. "Walt's not under arrest or in juvenile hall, so *that's* a relief, anyway. They're checking hospitals and... um... the *morgue*."

Suppressing her worst fears, Ruth looked down at the crying girl. "She... she's either utterly convinced that she's Walt, or she's the best con artist *ever*, David."

"Either way, she's not *our* problem! Either she needs the police or a doctor."

"My parents *hate* me!" Christina sobbed. "You both *hate* me!"

"We don't *hate* you, Christina!" explained David. "You... you just aren't our *son*! Do... do you think you're a *boy*? *Inside*, I mean? Is *that* why you want to be our Walt?"

"*No*, Daddy!" she cried. "I don't think I'm a boy inside. I'm a *girl*, like I always *was*, but now I'm a girl outside, *too*!"

"Our son wasn't a girl inside, Christina." he retorted. "He *told* us so, *many* times."

"No I *didn't*!" she shot back. "I *so* did not, Daddy! You only ever asked if I thought I was a *girl*, but I *didn't* think that! I *knew* I was stuck being a boy, but inside I kept being Christina a secret so... so..." Near to tears again, she couldn't bring herself to say out loud the reason she'd kept it a secret. *So you wouldn't have an ugly daughter! Now it's going to cost me my entire life!*

David shook his head. "Sweetie, our son *knows* that we know he's... *different*. *Delicate*. He knows that if he was a girl inside that we'd support him to be himself, or I guess in that case *her* to be *herself*. He'd have no *reason* to keep it hidden from us!"

"I did it because I was *ugly*, Daddy! I could *never* pass as a girl, even if I wore a ball gown and a dozen layers of makeup! It was no use even *trying*! So I just *prayed* and tried to be *good*... and the angel granted my *wish*!"

"*What* angel, sweetie?" Ruth asked curiously.

"I don't remember her name." she admitted. "She... she was really pretty and talked without moving her lips. She gave me a choice to accept the gift of becoming a girl or just stay the way I *was*, and warned me that there might be consequences and there was no going back! I shoulda said *no*! Being a girl isn't *worth* losing you two!" Once more the tears overwhelmed her as she finished talking.

Looking into one another's eyes, the two parents could see the hurt and anguish the girl was suffering. After a moment, Ruth shook her head. "You won't *lose* us, sweetie. We... we aren't your parents. We wish you would tell us where Walt is. We want him back *home*!"

As if on cue, the doorbell rang and the two looked up at each other hopefully. "*Walt*?" David yelled as he ran for the door.

Realizing that it couldn't be Walt because she was right in front of their unbelieving eyes, Christina concluded that it was the police. "Mother? *Please* don't do this to me? *Don't* send me *away*! You told me yesterday that you wanted me to focus on my *schoolwork*! How can I *do* that if you send me *away*? *Please*, Mother! You *have* to know it's *me*!"

Hearing the girl refer to a conversation she'd had with Walt when they were alone the evening before was unnerving. *How could she possibly know that!* Concluding that Walt must have told her, the only rational explanation, she looked sternly at the girl. "Tell me where Walt is! I *know* he told you those things, so he *must* be part of this ludicrous joke that's gone on *way* too long!"

Giving up, Christina just lay back down and closed her eyes before the tears began to flow once more. *God? Please help me! Take it back! Please!*

As she lay there crying, two police officers and two paramedics came in the room, the latter two beginning to examine her by shining lights in her eyes

and taking her blood pressure, temperature, and heart rate. Satisfied that she was in no immediate danger, they told her to just lay back.

Meanwhile, David was explaining in detail the last time he'd seen Walt, the odd feeling that someone had gotten into their home the night before, then the bizarre tale that Christina had been telling them both.

Seeing a lull in the conversation, the lead paramedic took one of the officers aside. "She has a mild concussion. It *could* explain mild delusions, but someone more qualified would have to attest to that, Officer Martinez."

"Is she safe to move?" he asked bluntly.

"We'll need the stretcher in here, but yeah. She's otherwise healthy as a horse! Top physical shape for her age, I'd say."

"How old?" the senior patrolman asked.

"Hmmm... ten to twelve I'd guess. Probably hasn't reached menarche yet."

"*Great!*" Christina grumbled. "I get torn away from my parents and now I'm gonna have to look forward to going through *that* alone!"

"What are your parent's names, Christina." the junior patrolman asked, hoping to catch her out with an honest off-the-cuff answer.

Looking up at him, she shook her dizzy head. "David and Ruth *Cocoran*. Twelve-twenty-six West *Arctic* Street." Seeing the irritated look on his face, Christina shrugged and looked at her parents. "*What?* Did you *expect* me to *lie?*"

"I... I wouldn't expect *Walt* to." Ruth admitted. "He was *always* honest."

"I still *am*, Mother." she stated sadly. "I just wish you'd *believe* me."

Turning to her husband, the confused woman shrugged. "She *does* sound an *awful* lot like *Walt*, David."

Looking at her as though she'd lost her mind, he shook his head. "*No*, Ruth! That's *crazy*! That is *not* our son!" he insisted, pointing at the girl.

"But maybe she's our *daughter*, David! Maybe we should send these people away and *talk* to her!"

Holding up his hand to forestall further debate, Officer Martinez settled the argument. "Let's not get *hysterical*! Until we can positively identify the girl, you two have done all you *can*. We'll take her to the hospital, then to juvenile services to have her fingerprints and footprint checked against the database for missing and exploited children. *We'll* find out who she is and get her home! As for your son, we've put out an Amber alert. I bet we find him soon!"

Picked up and placed on the gurney, Christina was catatonic with shock, only vaguely cognizant of her surroundings and what was happening to her. Her mind in a fog, she was barely aware that she'd been put in an ambulance and taken from her home and parents, then poked, prodded, and otherwise treated like a piece of meat. When a doctor tried to use a rape kit on her though, she came out of it as they began undressing her.

Her scream could be heard throughout the emergency room.

Chapter 3 - On Her Own

Pacing her exam room like a caged animal, Christina had a fist balled up and ready to strike out again at the next person to touch her, even as her other hand held up the loose-fitting pajama bottoms and boxer shorts. Her breath came in rapid intakes through her nostrils and out her mouth.

"Miss?" Doctor Ramsey tried to calm her down as he held his bruised cheek. "Please sit back down so we can continue the exam!"

"Next person that tries to touch me *there* eats my *knuckles* again, buster!" she growled. "Daddy taught me how to *defend* myself, so don't even *think* you can get away with anything without losing an *eye* you're fond of, *doc*!"

Looking at the two officers, he shrugged. "Patient is refusing treatment. It's not a medical emergency, I don't have consent from their guardian, and you don't have a court order, so... that's *it*. We're *done* here."

"Wait a minute!" Officer Raul Martinez told the doctor. "Let me talk to her!" Seeing the doctor hold up his hands in mock surrender, Raul turned to her and smiled kindly. "*Hi*! Remember me? I'm *Raul*! Officer Raul *Martinez*!"

Narrowing her eyes, she looked at him evilly. "Yeah, I *remember* you! You're the one that took me away from my *mother*! She was about to let me *stay* and *listen* to me!"

His friendly smile melted and he turned serious. "That's *right*. It's my job to *protect* kids like you! Now the *doc* here isn't going to *hurt* you, OK? He's just going to collect evidence from you in case you've been raped..."

"I *think* I'd know if I'd been *raped*... *Raul*!" she snarled. "The closest I've ever come to *that* is what *handsy* there was about to do to me! *No*!"

"You might *not* know, young lady!" he countered. "You lost consciousness!"

"For about ten *seconds!*" she snapped back. "Ten seconds alone with my *mother!*"

Loosing patience, he tried to be blunt and use scare tactics. "*Look, kid! Those people aren't your parents! They admitted that and are accusing you of aiding in their son being missing! Now are you gonna be a good girl and cooperate or do I have to put you in handcuffs?*"

Scoffing, Christina turned away from him. "You don't scare *me*, mister! I know you can't *touch* me for medical stuff without my parents' permission or a court order! Let me *see* it!"

"See *what?*"

"The piece of paper that lets Doctor *Feelgood* over there stick his hands up my *yahoo* against my *will!* Nobody's touched it *yet* and *he* certainly isn't going to be my first! I'm only *eleven* for crying out loud!"

Smiling, Officer Martinez took out his notebook. "*There! You're eleven! One piece at a time! Why don't you just tell me your full name and who your parents are and I can take you home. Is that were Walt is? At your house?*"

Rolling her eyes, she put a hand on her hip and struck that pose that women have been using for centuries that tells a man, '*Oh really? You think so?*'

Stymied by her obstinate refusal to cooperate, Raul shook his head. "Alright! *Fine!* We'll skip the rape kit! The nurse there was going to make sure nothing *bad* was going to happen to you, but we'll do it *your* way, OK?"

Calming down, she slowly edged her way closer to the exam table.

Tiffany Downs had been a nurse for ten years and thought she'd seen it all. When this wisp of a girl was brought in for a full exam, they'd managed to

do everything except the x-rays and rape kit without even so much as an acknowledgement of their existence from her. Tiffany knew a little of the girl's circumstances, but with her fully awake and combative she was sure of how to proceed.

"Doctor Ramsey? Officers? Would you step out for a moment so I can talk to her?" Seeing the policeman's hesitancy to leave his charge alone without police observation, she held up her hands. "Where can she go? The only way out is right by *you* if you wait outside!"

Seeing her point, Raul huffed and stormed out with his silent partner in tow. "Damn *kids!* We bust our *butts* trying to look out for them and..."

With just a withering stare at the attending physician, Tiffany made him go without a word. Turning at last to the obviously terrified little girl, she smiled warmly. "There! Now that there are no *men* around, why don't we have a *chat!* Hmm?" Sitting on the exam table, she patted the space next to her.

Still nervous that this was some sort of trick like the officer had tried to play on her, Christina slowly moved next to her and took a seat. "Thanks."

"Men are *brutes.*" Tiffany stated with a chuckle. "They have the sensitivity of the average *bulldozer!*" Seeing that it made the girl smile slightly, she returned the grin. "So why don't you tell *me* what happened? How did you hit your head?"

Suddenly embarrassed, Christina bit her lower lip nervously. "I... I fell out of bed."

Nodding, the nurse looked at her wisely. "*Whose* bed?"

Shocked at the insinuation that even *she* could follow, Christina's jaw dropped. "*Mine!*" she insisted after a moment.

Shrugging, Tiffany looked away. "Listen. *Christina*, right?" Seeing the girl nod, she continued. "Christina, I can't *help* you if I don't have all the *facts*. So start at the beginning."

"You'd never *believe* me!" Christina moaned. "*Nobody* will believe me! Heck! It happened to *me* and *I* don't believe me!"

Laughing with the girl's self-deprecating sense of humor, Tiffany bumped shoulders with her. "*Try* me! You never *know*, right?"

Knowing that she had to tell the nurse something, she was about to try making something up when she noticed the fringes of a tattoo on the woman's left arm. "What's *that*?"

"*Oh!*" Tiffany smiled as she lifted her sleeve, exposing the full image. "That's *Lisbeth*, Angel of Lost Souls. It's said that when a person is suffering and is truly deserving she'll grant them their heart's desire. My mother used to tell me stories about her! When I went to nursing school, I had her put on my arm so that she'd always remind me to do whatever kindness I *could* in life."

Stunned once more, she looked into the woman's eyes. "I... I *know* she does. She... she did that for *me*. I couldn't remember her *name*, though."

Thinking the girl was having fun with her, Tiffany played along. "So then, what was *your* heart's desire? Don't worry! It's not like a *birthday* wish! When *Lisbeth* grants a wish, there's no way to *lose* it!"

With a hard swallow, Christina took a breath and trusted this strange woman with the image of her savior and tormenter on her arm. "I... I wished I could be a *girl*. I... I was born a *boy*. My *legal* name is Walter."

Tiffany's eyebrows shot up at that. Of all the things she'd expected her to say, *that* never would have even crossed her mind. "Um... *OK!* Well, you wanna tell me the whole *thing*? Just start at the beginning and go slow."

Twenty minutes later, Christina was nearly hysterical again. "And then they just wheeled me out and brought me here while my parents stood by and did *nothing!* They let the cops take their own *daughter* away! Then lots of stuff happened and the next thing I know that *guy* is trying to pull my *boxers* off!"

Listening intently, Tiffany looked away. "Well, if your story were *true*, I think I could understand why you freaked." Looking back at her, the nurse tried to see the child ever being a boy. "Lisbeth sure did a number on *you!*"

"What do you mean?"

With a low laugh, Tiffany looked at the girl. "*Look* at you! You don't look *anything* like a *boy!*" She wasn't sure if she believed the girl's story or not, after all, Tiffany *did* believe in angels, but it was a stretch even for *her*.

Nodding sadly, Christina sighed. "So *now* what can I do? I have no *birth* certificate, no *parents*, no *school* enrollment... *Heck!* I don't even have my *shot* records to prove I've had all my shots to *go* to school! They'll probably *deport* me for being an illegal *alien!*"

Grimacing, Tiffany looked away. "You might not be *wrong*. Though they'd have a hard time proving what country you *do* come from! Your accent is typical Southwestern and no one is going to believe a blonde-haired blue-eyed girl came from *Guatemala!*" Seeing that it made the glum girl perk up some, she thought for a moment.

"OK, so let's say I *believe* you." Tiffany began. "I'm not saying that I *do*, but just for the sake of argument, you say your mom was close to *believing* you?"

"Yeah." she nodded glumly. "But that greasy *tyrant* outside basically told them to mind their own business and shipped me here to have my *virginity* taken by a guy three times my *age!*"

Laughing gently to show understanding, Tiffany furrowed her brow after a moment. "So, we just need to make Officer Martinez drop his investigation and let you go back home." Tsking, she shook her head. "That's a tall order, girlfriend! See, Officer Martinez really *is* a good and dedicated cop. All he wants is to see you get home so he can know that you're safe and arrest the scumbag he thinks kidnapped you, did awful things that you can't remember, and dumped you at that house and took Walt."

"So... I'm basically *dog-meat*." Christina sighed. "A *nobody* that's gonna end up in a foster home 'till I'm *thirty*... living under the stairs and eating *gruel*. *That* what you're saying?"

"You watch too many movies." Tiffany smirked with a bump of her shoulder. With a mischievous grin, Tiffany put her arm around the girl. "Sorry, girl! You're gonna have to come up with a better story. *That* one will get you locked *up*!" Hugging Christina with one arm, she shook her gently. "Why don't you tell me what *really* happened? I *promise*, whatever it is, it has to be better than getting labeled as a *nut*!"

Seeing that even an adult that *might* believe her wouldn't, Christina shut down and refused to talk. When nearly ten minutes went by with no response, Nurse Downs shook her head and left. After a few minutes alone, Christina got up and moved a chair next to the door to look out the window. Seeing no one outside, she got down, replaced the chair, and slowly cracked the door open.

"What do you *mean* she's not in the system?" Officer Martinez shouted at the phone. "She *has* to be! I mean, she's *got* to be a runaway or *something*! She *has* to have a record! She's already a professional *con artist*!"

Seeing no one directly watching, she quietly slid out of the exam room and down a short hall. Seeing a sign that said, *Hospital Staff Only*, she pulled the door open and slipped inside.

The room was dark, smelled of sweat and hand sanitizer, and she heard the sound of slow breathing from somewhere off to her left. After her eyes adjusted she saw a resident lying on a couch, light snores coming from the man who'd been at the hospital for thirty hours. Creeping slowly by him, she made her way around a corner until she saw a number of lockers. At the back of the room she saw her one chance at freedom.

There was a door with an exit sign above it.

Gently opening it, she saw daylight beyond and quietly sneaked out. Looking down at herself, she knew she had to find different clothes fast or she'd be right back where she started. *Where can I get clothes without money?* she wondered. *If I just had my cell phone I could at least pawn it, but I have nothing!* Even as she considered her problem, she came around a corner and spotted her salvation.

There at the corner of the employee parking lot was a clothing donation bin that was open. Moving quickly, she grabbed the first things she could get before ducking behind the dumpster-sized bin to hide as she changed. Luck was with her when she found she'd grabbed a pair of girl's jeans and a sweater. Changing quickly, she left the pajama bottoms on the ground.

The jeans were too long and loose, but the belt they had with them solved one problem and a few minutes rolling up the cuffs solved the other. The sweater was too hot for the high temperature, but it was enough to give her more time searching through the donations without looking so conspicuous.

Within twenty minutes she had found a pair of girl's shoes, socks, and a pink top that fit. Not long after that she was well on her way down the street and trying to look as nonchalant as possible, even as the hospital was being turned upside down trying to find her.

It took her hours to walk back to her own neighborhood. At first, she wasn't sure where she was going to go, but she figured that starting with her own

neighborhood was the best place to begin. As she walked, she kept her eyes open and managed to find some lost change in a gutter. Eventually she began to see a familiar sight; the only payphone within ten miles of her house. She had seen it before, but never had need of it. *I'm not even sure how to use it!*

Looking around, it was an odd sensation. She knew this gas station. She walked by it on the way to school every day and sometimes even bought gum, sweets, or soda on the way. Now though, the building seemed huge, and the payphone seemed too impossibly tall to use. Her former five-foot-two height would have made it a breeze, but now at a hair under four-foot-five, reaching the coin slot was impossible.

Looking around, she saw a wooden pallet and thought it just tall enough to stand on and use the phone. Trying to pick it up, she nearly jerked her arms out of their sockets. It couldn't weigh more than twenty or thirty pounds, but to her it might as well have been five hundred. The upper body strength that came so easily to her before was simply gone. For the first time in her short life, Christina felt vulnerable.

Being big for her age, at the upper end of height for eleven-year-old boys, she was never picked on, despite her gentle nature. Now at the lower end of size range for eleven-year-old girls, she was pitifully weak by comparison. *I hadn't counted on that part.* she pondered. *Maybe that was one of the questions Lisbeth thought I should ask.* She tried reaching the coin slot on tiptoes, but it was just barely out of her reach. She needed help.

It was then that Christina noticed the kids walking home from school. She hadn't realized until just that moment how long she must have been walking, nor how hungry she was, having never gotten breakfast. Holding her stomach, she started looking for anyone who might help her. Spotting Kathy, Lindsey, and Beth walking home together, before she even thought, she heard herself yell out, "*Kathy!*"

Instantly she realized what she'd done wrong. Kathy and her other friends at school knew nothing about Christina and certainly would never believe that their giant protector who kept the bullies away could become a girl so small she couldn't use a payphone. Her smile evaporated like an ice cube at noon as the three girls turned toward her.

Kathy was especially incensed. Not only was it *her* that this strange girl had called out to, she'd interrupted the story she was telling about Walt not just being *absent*, but actually *missing*. Her eyes narrowed and she turned toward the small girl, storming up to her angrily. "Just who are *you* that you know *my* name, *little girl*? Did I used to *baby-sit* you?"

Hurt that her best friend was being so mean to her, she tried to hold back the tears, but they came anyway. The stress of the day was just too much and she collapsed onto the pavement, an emotional mess.

"Way to *go*, Kathy! Wanna take her money, *too*?" Lindsey admonished her as Kathy just stared with her mouth hanging open at the sobbing girl.

Unable to stem the tide, words just started falling out of Christina's mouth unbidden. "How could you be so *mean*?" she sobbed. "You were my best *friend*! I *protected* you from Jim Sullivan last summer! Now you *yell* at me when my whole *life* is falling apart!"

Unable to follow what the girl was saying, even the few words she did catch didn't make any sense to Kathy. "Look, I'm *sorry*, OK? It's just... my best friend is *missing*, so I'm *really* uptight right now! *Please* don't cry!"

Bringing her tears under control after a moment, she understood Kathy's concern as Beth helped her up off the ground. "I... I'm *sorry*! I just... I don't have my cell phone and I can't reach the coin slot to use the payphone! Could you guys help me move that wooden pallet over to the phone so I can use it? *Please*?"

"Here." Kathy offered as she reached into her backpack and retrieved her cell phone. "You can just use *mine*. Just... be *quick* OK? I'm hoping to hear back from my friend to know if he's *OK!*"

Nodding, she looked at her friend's phone that she'd seen a thousand times before. It was eerie looking the Amber alert with her old name on it. "Um... it's kind of an *embarrassing* call. Can... can I use your phone in the gas station bathroom? That way I can have some privacy?"

Understanding the girl's position, Kathy nodded as the four headed toward the vacant bathroom. "Sure. By the way, I don't remember your name."

"Um... it's Christina. I don't think you know me, but I know *you* though... through *Walt*. He... he and I are sort of *related*."

The three girls immediately brought Christina to a halt, Kathy physically taking the girl by the shoulders to make Christina face her.

"You're related to *Walt*?" she cried. "Where *is* he! IS he *OK? Please!*"

Seeing the near panic and desperation in her best friend's eyes, Christina couldn't let her worry. "He... he's OK. They found him. He... he'll have to go away for a while though. Maybe a long time. He kinda got hurt when someone got in his house last night. I can't say how. He won't let me." She was trying to pick her words carefully so as to not lie to her friends.

"Oh, *God!*" Kathy nearly broke down herself. "My *Walt? Hurt? No!*"

Seeing her even *more* distraught, Christina tried to lessen it. "It's *OK!* He'll be *fine!* He just... he needs time to *heal* is all! He had to go to the hospital, then he went someplace else, but I *promise* he'll be OK! *Please* don't cry, Kathy!" Her friend's tears were threatening to make Christina's return. *Why am I crying so much! I never used to cry this much before!*

Getting herself under control, Kathy nodded. "OK. If you *say* so, Christina. Go ahead and use the bathroom. I'll wait out here." Turning to her other two friends, she sniffed back her tears. "Why don't you guys go on home. I... I'll call you *later*, OK?"

As Beth and Lindsey left the two alone, waving goodbye, Christina entered the filthy bathroom and locked the door behind her. Dialing her mother's cell phone number, she waited anxiously as it rang. She jumped when the line picked up, she was so nervous.

"*Kathy?*" Ruth answered desperately. "Kathy, do you know where *Walt* is? I *promise* he's not in trouble! I... I just need to know he's *OK!*"

Lowering her voice as low as it would go, Christina did her best imitation of her old voice. "*Mother?*"

"*Walt!*" she screamed into the phone. "*Walt, baby! Where are you? Are you with Kathy?*"

"Um... yeah." Christina growled. "I... um... I'm sorry I worried you, Mother. I didn't *mean* to."

"What's *wrong*, sweetie?" she begged. "You sound *sick!* Why won't you come *home?* Who was that *girl* in your room? *Talk* to me baby!"

"Um... I *can't* come home Mother. I was... *changed.*"

More confused than ever, Ruth could only listen as words utterly failed her.

"Mother? That *girl was* me." Slowly, she let her voice shift up to her new normal tone. "When I was five, you asked me if I was a girl and I said no. Then I told you that boys were stupid and one of them pushed Kathy over at recess and I told on him and got him in trouble. When I was seven, you

asked me if I liked boys and I told you boys were gross and I couldn't marry a boy because I *was* one." Pausing a moment, she waited for a reply.

Slowly lowering herself into the chair at the dining room table, Ruth still couldn't answer. Logic defied what she was hearing, but still she was starting to have a hard time letting it make sense any other way.

"Mother? Are you still there?" Christina begged. "Mother, I want to come *home*! I... I ran away from the police. Can... can I come *home*, Mother? *Please?*"

Unable to handle what she was hearing, that 'Walt' was somewhere with Kathy and that Christina girl and her 'son' was feeding the girl things to say that would convince her that the impossible was true, she hung up. Ruth was stunned that the child she knew and loved was trying to pull off such a cruel trick. *Why is he doing this to us?* she wondered. *What did we do? Where did we go wrong?*

"Bye, Mother. I love you." she said to dead air. Noticing that her cheeks were wet, she used some toilet paper to dry them before opening the door to return Kathy's cell phone. When she looked up at Kathy, she saw the astonished look on the bigger girl's face.

"C... *Christina?*" she asked in astonishment. "Is... is that really *you* Walt?"

Chapter 4 - Best Friends Forever

Staring into Kathy's eyes, Christina knew her best friend had listened in on the conversation with her mother. "You... you *remember* Christina? Kathy! I'm sorry I didn't *tell* you! I didn't think you'd *believe* me!"

Looking the girl up and down, Kathy could see nothing of the boy she'd called her best friend since before she could remember. The girl before her was pretty, *way* too pretty and small to be Walt, but somehow she knew things only Walt could know. A memory even *she* forgot. "I'm not sure I *do* yet. This had better be *unbelievably* good!"

Christina took a moment to collect her thoughts. "Um... well, do you believe in *angels*?"

Thinking a moment, she looked at the girl who stood six inches shorter than she did that used to stand three inches taller. "Um... you mean like with white robes, wings, and *halos*?"

With a nod, Christina tried to explain. "Yeah, but they don't *have* to look like that. Lisbeth just looked like a beautiful woman. She's the Angel of Lost Souls. She came to me last night and offered to grant me my wish."

"Why *you*?" Kathy almost spat. "And how did your wish end up making you into a *girl*? Admittedly you're a *pretty* girl, but..." Seeing her best friend blush at the compliment, she paused a moment. "Is it like one of those '*be careful what you wish for*' things? I mean, did she like, *trick* you?"

"No." Christina admitted. "I... this is exactly what I wished for. I just didn't count on the *side* effects, like being a weakling midget and my own parents and friends not knowing who I *was*!"

Her familiar humor made Kathy giggle. Stopping after a moment, she looked deeply in Christina's eyes, as if searching for something. Finally her serious

mien slowly grew into a gentle smile and Kathy's eyes lit up. "I... I can *see* you! In your *eyes*! They're the wrong *color*, but it... it's still the *same*! It's... *you*! You're really *Walt*!"

Tilting her head curiously at her, Christina knotted her brows. "How can *you* tell that? My own *mother* couldn't see it!"

Blushing and turning to start walking toward her parents' house again, Kathy answered, "I... I guess she never spent as long as me looking at your eyes."

Stopping their progress, Christina looked at her with wonder. "K... *Kathy*? Do... um... did you *like* me as *Walt*? I mean *like-like* me?"

Shaking her head slowly, Kathy resumed walking. "No. I... I *loved* *Walt*. Didn't you *know*?"

Suddenly feeling sick to her stomach, Christina sat on the curb a moment. When Kathy sat next to her, she noticed the smaller girl had started crying.

"Oh, Christina! Don't be *sad*! I... I'm sad enough for the *both* of us!" After a moment, she took Christina's hand. "Can... can I ask you something?" Seeing the girl nod and sniff back tears, she pressed forward. "Um... why'd you wanna be a *girl*? Is this about me calling you *Christina* when we were little?"

Shrugging, Christina tried to explain, but ended up asking, "I... I thought you *forgot* about *Christina*? When we started Kindergarten, you acted like you didn't know who she *was*!"

Kathy looked away, embarrassedly. "I... I *didn't*... until I heard you talking to your mom... and then it just sort of... *clicked*... and I *remembered* it." Turning back to her, her tone turned harsh. "Besides, *you're* the one that started insisting you were a *boy* all the time!"

"I... I thought I *had* to." she admitted. "Walt could *never* be seen as a girl!"

Putting her arm around her best friend, Kathy tried to console her. "It's alright. I... I think I understand. When you were Walt, you were pretty much a girl still, but you couldn't really ever *look* like one." Hesitating a moment, she asked a new question. "So... um... does this mean you like... *boys*?"

Going quickly from crying to laughing, she shook her head and giggled. "No! Being a girl is just what I've wanted since I was *three*! Lisbeth told me that becoming a girl wouldn't change who I am or who I would like, but I... I thought it would be like in a *fairytale*... like suddenly, *whoosh*! I'd be a girl and everyone would know that I was always a girl and I'd live happily ever *after*!" Getting up, she resumed walking toward Kathy's house. "What I *didn't* count on was that I would become a girl, but everything *else* would stay as it *was*. I also didn't know that you were falling for me as Walt. I'm *sorry*!"

"Yeah! This *totally* sounds like one of those '*be careful what you wish for*' things, like that old cartoon, *The Flying Mouse*. You shoulda got *three* wishes so you could use your second wish for everyone to know you as a girl, and then use the third wish to... um... maybe be to be *rich*... or something."

Noticing she'd cut herself off and switched mid-sentence, Christina looked over at her earnestly. "*Kathy*? Secret shake!"

This was something sacred between the two girls. Whenever one of them called for the secret shake, it meant that there could be no secrets between them. Gripping each other's fingers in a crisscross, the two went through an elaborate range of hand and finger motions until their hands were on the other person's heart.

"I promise..." Christina began and Kathy picked up, still amazed that this girl knew her and Walt's secret shake, "...that I will have no secrets from my best friend." they finished together.

"What do you think my third wish should have been, Kath?"

Embarrassed, the girl wanted to run and hide, but the oath had been sworn. "Um... your third wish could have been for me to be a boy so we could still... um..."

Stunned, Christina resumed their slow walk. "Do... do you *want* to be a boy, Kath?"

With a shrug, she looked away. "*No*, but... um... it'd be *worth* it so that..."

Now sadder than ever as the two turned up Kathy's walkway, the new girl shook her head. "It was a *stupid* wish! I wish I could take it *back*!"

"*Can* you?" Kathy asked hopefully. "Like a money-back guarantee?"

"Nope." Christina admitted. "Lisbeth warned me there was no going back."

"Oh."

Coming up to her door, she turned to Kathy. "Could... could I come in with you Kath? I... I don't really have anywhere else to *go*... Oh! and the *cops* are after me!"

Kathy's eyes widened. "The *cops*? How did *that* happen?"

"It's a long story."

Nodding, Kathy took Christina's hand. "Sure. I'd do *anything* to help... um... a *friend*."

Christina could see the sadness wrapping around Kathy like a blanket. She never knew how much Kathy liked her, and was only just then beginning to suspect that was the reason Kathy had started dressing more provocatively around her. *And I had to go and ruin it for her!*

Entering Kathy's home, one Christina had been in almost as often as her own, she found it both familiar and yet alien, like the building had grown overnight.

"Come on." Kathy led her towards the kitchen. "Mom won't be home until four. You hungry?"

"*Starved!*" she admitted. "I never got breakfast before... um... well, I guess I should start at the beginning."

While Kathy made them sandwiches, Christina told her about her dream, waking up and her parents' reaction to her, being taken to the hospital, and her 'daring escape'. As soon as she finished, Kathy sat next to her and slid the small plate over to her.

"Wow!" Kathy managed as Christina tore into her sandwich. "I can't believe your own *parents* didn't *know* you! I mean, now that I *remember* it all, you were Christina for like a *year!*" Seeing that the girl wasn't listening but just focused on inhaling her food, Kathy slapped her shoulder lightly. "Hey! Slow down or you're gonna *choke!* You act like you've never *eaten* before!"

Pausing to chew and swallow, Christina considered that. "Well... I guess in a way *I never have*. *Walt* ate dinner last night. I don't know what Lisbeth actually *did* to me. I think this is a whole new *body*. If so, it's never eaten *anything* before!" Looking at the sandwich, she shook her head. "Has peanut butter *always* tasted this good?"

Tilting her head, Kathy had to think a moment. "No... you actually didn't *used* to think so! Remember? You used to trade them with me for my bologna sandwiches until you told your mom you didn't really like it and she stopped making them for you? It's been a few years since then, though. I guess you forgot."

Thinking back several years, she recalled the time. "Oh *yeah!*" Turning to her hostess, she furrowed her brow and asked, "So why'd you *make* me one?" before taking another huge bite.

Kathy giggled and shrugged. "*I don't know! I forgot! So did you!*"

"Well, I like 'em *now!*" Christina pointed out. "They taste *totally* different!" Once she finished the sandwich and a glass of milk, she turned to Kathy. "I can kind of understand why my parents didn't *know* me." she admitted. "I... um... I never *told* them about Christina... not even when I was *little.*"

Getting up and heading for her room with her guest following, Kathy shook her head. "Why *not?*"

As Kathy sat on her bed, Christina sat at her friend's desk. "Well, at *first* it was just between *us.* You just treated me like another girl, then one day you told me that Walt wasn't a good name for a girl and started calling me *Christina,* but only *you* ever did that. When I went home I was Walt again. I was close to asking Mother and Daddy if I could change my name when they started getting worried about me being girly. By then I knew I could never look like a girl, so I just told them I was a boy... which was *true.* I *was* a boy... on the *outside,* anyway."

Nodding in understanding, Kathy looked off into the distance. "Oh. I... I guess I remember that. Not *really,* though. It's kinda vague. I remember I was a sad when you started saying you were a boy, so I stopped calling you Christina... then I just sorta *forgot* after a while." Tilting her head slightly, she chuckled a little. "Huh! It's *funny,* though. Even after I started calling you *Walt,* you were *still* my best friend, even though you were a *boy.*"

"Well..." Christina pointed out, "I didn't change how I *acted.* I just stopped calling myself a girl and you stopped calling me Christina. Nothing *else* changed. I could *still* beat you at jump rope!"

"That wasn't *fair!*" Kathy pointed out with a giggle. "You were *stronger* and had more *endurance* than me! Stupid *testosterone*, anyway!"

"Well, you don't need to worry about *that* now." Christina looked at her thin arms and down at her tiny stature. "I doubt I'm going to be beating anyone at anything *athletic* anymore." Pausing a moment, she started to giggle. "Besides, I don't think my *football* uniform will *fit* anymore!"

Laughing together a moment, Kathy grinned at her. "Well, you could always join me on the *cheer* squad!"

"Are you *kidding?*" the new girl asked incredulously. "I've seen you guys working out! No *way* is *this* body going to keep up with *that!* Besides, the skirts are *way* too short!"

Her smile disappearing quickly, Kathy looked hurt. "Is... is *that* what you think of me, Christina? Is that what *Walt* thought? Is that why you made those *jokes* about my outfit yesterday?"

Looking away ashamedly, Christina felt her tears welling up again. "I... I'm *sorry* I said those things, Kathy. I... I was... um..."

Seeing her struggle to get it out, Kathy got up and stood in front of her. "You were *what*, Christina? *What?*"

"*Jealous!*" she blurted out after a moment. "I was *jealous* of you, *OK?* You're *so* pretty... and *popular*, and *graceful*, and... and... you were free to wear whatever you *wanted!* If you felt like it, you could come to school in gear you bought from the boy's department and no one would say anything except, 'I guess she's feeling *grungy* today.' right?" As she vented years of frustration, Christina began to cry. "Meanwhile I was *huge*, lumbering, my only friends were you, Lindsey, Beth, and a few other girls, and... and... and I could *only* ever wear frumpy *boy* clothes! I could *never* wear an outfit like *that!* I wasn't *allowed* to!"

Seeing her best friend reduced to tears of frustration, she wanted to console her. Rubbing Christina's back gently, she knotted her brow. "I'm *sorry*, Christina! You're *right*! It *is* unfair that you can't ever be pretty when..." Stopping mid-thought, she smiled. "*Hey*! What are we *talking* about! You're *gorgeous* now! And a *girl* who can wear whatever she *likes*, now!"

Sniffing back the tears, Christina shrugged. "Not that it *matters*. I'm *homeless* and *penniless*! I don't even know where I'm going to eat *dinner* or *sleep* tonight! So *yea*! I'm free now to wear girl *or* boy's donation clothes!" As she finished, she picked at the top she wore.

Finally looking over her outfit, her eyes widened. "Oh! I didn't even *think* about your clothes! Did... did you get them from a donation bin?"

Nodding sadly, Christina looked at the floor. "I... I *stole* them from one! Now I not only am a *nobody*, I'm a *thief* and a *sinner*!"

"Hold it right *there*!" Kathy snapped. "*Christina*! Those clothes were *donated* to the less *fortunate*, right? Can you think of *anyone* less fortunate than *you* right now? Are the people that get those donations stealing them, *too*?"

With a shrug, her friend looked away. "I... I guess you're right. OK, so I have just as much right to them as anyone. Still, as of right now, this is my entire *wardrobe*, Kathy! It's not exactly high fashion! Plus those cops at the hospital are probably still looking for me. Eventually they'll find my old PJs behind the donation bin. Officer Martinez isn't exactly Sherlock Holmes, but he's not *stupid*!"

"Wait! You were taken to the hospital in *pajamas*?"

"*Worse*. I was taken there in *Walt's* pajamas!" Christina pointed out. "When I woke up, I was still wearing the same PJs I went to bed in, but they were the size I *used* to be while I *shrank*. I had to hold up the *bottoms*! When I

snuck out, I was lucky enough to find this open donation bin, so I snagged what I could find that would fit and stashed my old PJs behind it. When they find them, they'll know I'm in the city."

"Phoenix is a pretty big place to get lost in, Christina." Kathy pointed out. "There's like over a *million* people here!" Really looking at her friend, Kathy puzzled over something. "Um... so, did the angel pick how you'd look?"

"No." she answered half-heartedly. She was still very unsure of her chances of avoiding the police once she left to find a place to sleep. "This is always how I imagined myself as a girl."

"Really?" Kathy was surprised. "A *blonde*?"

"Just like my... um... like *Mother*." she explained sadly.

Realizing she'd missed something Christina had mentioned earlier, Kathy looked earnestly at her. "Um... Christina? Why did you say I was *pretty* earlier?"

Rolling her eyes at Kathy, she smirked. "*Please!* You *know* that you're *gorgeous*, Kathy! Tom Bates has only asked you out like a *zillion* times!"

Embarrassed, Kathy looked away. "Oh. I thought..."

Seeing that Kathy had been hoping she liked her the way Kathy liked Walt, Christina blushed. "Oh! Um... well, it... it's sorta weird with you. You're like, *really* pretty, but you're my best *friend*. Before you told me that you... um... you loved *Walt*, I didn't even *think* about you that way."

Turning to look at Christina, Kathy had to know. "And now that you *know*?"

"Now I feel *awful!*" she admitted. "It's like I took him *away* from you! It's *so* not fair! I didn't even *think* how my wish might affect everyone else! *You*,

my *parents, everyone!* It's like I *killed* him and took his *place*, and he's *me*, but I'm not *him!* I want to *fix* it, but I *can't!* I'm *stuck!*"

"Are you *happy*, though?" Kathy asked hopefully.

"Not *really*. I mean, I'm happy that I'm finally a *girl*, but the cost was *way* too high! I wish I could take it back! I just want to go to sleep so I can wake up and find out it was all just a big nightmare!"

"Speaking of *sleep...*" Kathy segued, "Got any idea where you're gonna do that tonight?"

"No!" the smaller girl snapped. "I don't know what I'm doing for dinner either... or what I'm gonna do *tomorrow*, or the *next* day..."

"Aren't you gonna come back to *school?*" Kathy inquired.

"I can't exactly go to school and tell everyone I'm *Walt!*" she pointed out. "*Christina* Cocoran isn't even *enrolled* at our elementary school, and *she* can't even *get* enrolled because she doesn't have a *birth* certificate, *shot* record, or more importantly, *parents* that can enroll her! On top of *that*, I only have this one outfit! I'm *doomed* because my parents don't *know* me."

"Well, I think I can solve the *clothes* problem." Kathy opined. "Mom still has a lot of the outfits I outgrew last year in a box in the storage shed. You can have your pick of 'em. As for where you can have dinner and sleep, you can stay *here* tonight... if you *like*." Even as she offered it, her cheeks flushed at the idea that she might share a room with the person she'd been slowly falling in love with for the last several years.

"I *can't*, though!" Christina exclaimed. "I mean, if you ask your parents if I can stay, they're *going* to want to call *my* parents and find out if it's OK, right? I can't exactly give them *my* parents' phone numbers! They've *disowned* me, effectively! I don't even have a last *name* I can give them!"

"What was your mom's *maiden* name?"

Thinking for a moment, she tried to remember her maternal grandparents' last name. She hadn't seen them in so long, it was difficult. "Um... I think it was Robbins. Yeah! That's it! Grandpa and Grandma *Robbins*! I haven't seen either of them in like six years. They live back east where Mother grew up. *Boston*, I think."

"So why not Christina Robbins? Do you have a girl *middle* name?"

"Yeah." Christina grumbled. "*Joy*, ironically."

"So, now you're Christina Joy Robbins! As for getting my parents' to give their permission for you to stay, I have an idea. There's a website where you can text cell phones. I can just use *that*, text them like I'm your mom and say that you asked to stay at my house since 'she' has to work late tonight and 'she' just wanted to text and find out if they're OK with it... or something."

Thinking about the idea, Christina shrugged. "OK. I *guess* it might work. It means doing an awful lot of *lying*, though. I don't like that. I'm *supposed* to be the best girl I *can* be, and lying isn't exactly a good way to start my new life off with!"

"What other choice *is* there, Christina?" Kathy asked as she moved closer. "I mean, it's either *that* or you sleep on the *street* tonight! Do you *know* the kind of things that happen to a girl living on the streets of a big city? You aren't *Walt* anymore! You wouldn't last five *minutes*!"

Seeing no other options, Christina sagged her shoulders and nodded. "OK."

With a cheerful grin, Kathy set to work on her plan. When the website asked her to confirm that she was thirteen years of age or older, she just checked the box and moved on. Setting up a free account with the name Marie

Robbins, she spent a few minutes composing a text to send to her mother. When she was sure it was perfect, she hit send and waited.

She didn't have to wait more than a minute before the site pinged that there was a reply. Reading it, she looked up at Christina and grinned. "We're *in!*"

Reading the brief text exchange with Kathy's mom, Christina felt a lump raise in her throat. "I don't know, Kathy! I have a bad feeling about this! Why did you tell her that my mom was going out of town for three days? I know your mom said it was *fine*, but I can't go to *school* with you! What do I do when I'm supposed to be *gone* all day?"

Shaking her head, Kathy rolled her eyes in disbelief at how innocent her best friend could be sometimes. "Look! We'll get ready for school, you'll leave with me, I'll give you my house key, then when we get close to school you head back here and go through my old clothes until I get home! Mom leaves for work about fifteen minutes after I leave, so by the time you get back here she'll be *gone!*"

"Yeah? Isn't it going to be a little *odd* that I won't have a change of clothes?" Christina pointed out. "I mean, if my *mother* sent me here, she would have at *least* packed me a few days of outfits, right? Not to mention a nightgown or two. Underwear? A *toothbrush*? I don't have *any* of that, and I can't use *your* old clothes because your mom would *recognize* them! It won't *work!*"

Kathy bit her lower lip. "Oh *yeah*. I hadn't *thought* of that." Looking at the texts that she'd exchanged with her mother, she tried to think of any way to solve these new issues, but couldn't. "I guess I'll have to text her and tell her that your 'mom' made other arrangements... like staying with your uncle or something." Typing out the reply, she glumly sent it and put her phone away. "So... what're you gonna *do* then?"

Thinking hard, Christina shook her head slowly. "I don't know."

Meanwhile, four blocks away, David and Ruth Cocoran sat at their kitchen table staring at their phones, hoping and praying that they would get some word from the police that their son had been found and was OK.

The day had been an absolute nightmare. Both calling off work, they had spent all day driving around to the places where they thought Christina might be. When Ruth had received the call from Kathy's cell phone, it only reinforced with the two of them that 'Walt' was *doing* this to them for some reason. Now they were just waiting to hear back from the police to find out what they learned from Kathy.

The knock on the door caused both girls to jump in fright. Looking at her friend, Kathy's eyes went wide. "Who could *that* be? *Mom's* not supposed to be here for another half hour, and she wouldn't *knock!*"

In a near panic, Christina stood up and grabbed Kathy's shoulders "Please! You have to *hide* me!"

Hearing another louder knock, Kathy looked toward the door and then back at Christina. "OK! Calm *down!*" Thinking fast, she looked around her room before her eyes settled on her dresser. Looking Christina up and down, she pulled her over to the white oak piece of furniture, opened the bottom drawer, moved her sweaters underneath her bed, and stood back. "Climb in! *Quick!*"

Hesitating only a moment, she got down on all fours and slowly shifted her weight into the tiny space. Curling up in a ball, she lay down until she was all the way in.

Kathy sat down and pushed with her legs against the drawer, using her bed as a brace against her back. The drawer groaned, but soon was closed. Getting up, she ran to the front door just as someone knocked very loudly and she heard a voice from the other side of the door.

"Police!" the man's voice yelled. "Open up!"

Pausing in fear, Kathy calmed herself before opening the small door in the large oak door. "Yes? Can I help you?" she asked politely.

Raul Martinez looked at the little opening, but couldn't see anything inside. "I'm Officer Martinez. This is my partner, Officer Johnson. Are you Kathy Grant?"

"Yes." she answered simply.

"May we come in, Miss Grant?"

"My mother's not home, officer." Kathy stated honestly. "I'm not supposed to open the door to *anyone*! You might be *faking* being police officers!"

Irritated, Officer Martinez held his emotions in check. "Look, we're searching for a missing boy! Walter Cocoran! His parents received a call from *your* cell phone a short time ago. It was someone who obviously had Walter *with* her. Was that *you*, Miss Grant?"

Thinking quickly, she pulled out her phone and shut it off, knowing the officers couldn't see her. "No. I lost my phone sometime today. Somebody must have taken it."

Pulling out his own phone, he dialed the number he was given for Kathy's cell and heard as it went directly to voicemail. "Damn!" He'd hoped that on hearing the phone ringing from the other side of the door he could catch the girl in a lie. "Look, we need to ask you a few questions about Walter. May we come in?"

"Not unless you got a warrant!" Kathy shot back. "Even then, you'd have to wait for my mom to get home! I'm not opening this door for *anyone*! If you try and break in, I'll call the cops!"

"I thought you didn't have your *phone*?" he tried again to trick her.

"I can use the *house* phone, *stupid!*" she fired back. "My parents still *have* one! I'm calling the cops!" Running to the old landline phone, Kathy dumped her cell into the drawer of the table it sat on and picked up the receiver. Dialing the emergency number, she only had to wait a moment before a voice came on the line.

"Nine-one-one. What's your emergency?" the woman's calm voice asked.

"My name's Kathy Grant. There are two men on my porch claiming to be police officers and they want me to let them in, but my mom's not home!"

"OK. You did the right thing, Kathy. Don't let them in." Getting the girl's address, the woman reached out to the police department to advise them and find out if they were actually police or if a unit needed to be dispatched there quickly.

"I'm on the phone with the police!" Kathy shouted. "You better get outta here!"

"Kathy?" the woman called out to her.

"Yes ma'am?"

"OK. I contacted the police and they verified that Officers Martinez and Johnson were in fact last reported heading to your house. Is that who they said they were?"

"Yes ma'am."

"OK. Make them show you their ID, and if it *is* them then it's alright. OK?"

"Am I gonna get in trouble for calling since it's *legit*?"

With a smile the girl could hear in her voice, the woman shook her head. "No, sweetie! You won't! You did the right thing, OK? Go check their ID and if it's OK then tell me and I'll hang up."

Putting the phone down, she walked back to the door. "Show me your ID. Hold it up to the little window!"

Frustrated by having to jump through hoops just to talk to the girl, he pulled out his department ID and held it up. "There! *See?*"

When the other officer did the same, Kathy ran back to the phone. "It's OK! Thanks!"

"I'm glad it was really the police, Kathy!" she replied. "Don't hesitate to call if you need us! Goodbye!"

Hanging up, she slowly walked back to the door and unlocked it. Opening up only just enough to let them see her, she sighed. "Sorry, officer. I was just doing what my parents told me to do."

Calming down, Raul smiled and turned on his charm. "That's OK, Kathy! You did good! Can we come in?"

"No." she denied them. "I'll come *out*, though." Slipping out the door and closing it behind her, she turned to them. "So... what do you want to know about Walt?"

Chapter 5 - Starting Over

Scared and alone, Christina huddled in the dark of her best friend's bottom drawer, unsure how long she would have to wait there. Praying silently, she tried not to cry.

Please God! I... I wanna have my old life back! I want Mother and Daddy! Just... make it all go back to the way it was! I don't care if I have an ugly boy's body! I don't know what to do! I've had to do a lot of things I don't want to do just to survive! I ran away, I've lied, I took these clothes! I feel like I'm doing everything wrong! What should I do? Waiting in the silence, she could hear muffled voices, but not what they were saying. It was then that she felt a new terror. *Oh no! I gotta go to the bathroom!*

At that, she began to silently cry.

She lay there for what seemed like forever, her legs cramping and her bladder feeling like it was about to burst. Hearing movement in the bedroom, the voices became clearer.

"I told you, officer! He's not *here*!" Kathy insisted.

Opening the closet doors, Raul pushed the girl's clothes out of the way to see if anyone was hiding in them. Seeing nothing unusual, he looked around the room. Leaning down to look under the bed, he saw nothing but the girl's sweaters and stood back up, sure now that there was no one else in the room. "Your mom said I could look around, Miss Grant." Turning to the girl, he tried to see if she was looking anywhere particular.

Knowing where Christina was, Kathy couldn't help but look at the drawer, wondering how long the poor girl could stand being in that tiny space.

Seeing her glance, he looked at the dresser. Narrowing his eyes, he stepped closer to look it over, opening the top drawer.

"Hey!" Kathy yelled. "That's my *underwear*! Get your pervy hands *off*! Mom!"

Linda Grant came into her daughter's room and saw the officer searching her drawers. "Officer *Martinez*!" she shouted at him. "You said you were looking for the *Cocoran* boy! He's nearly as tall as *I* am! He can't *possibly* be in one of my daughter's *drawers*! What are you *really* looking for? That's *enough*! Get *out*!"

Closing the drawer, Raul turned and tried to de-escalate the situation as he'd been trained. "Mrs. Grant, you said we could search your premises. Your daughter was looking over here, so I looked too. Unless you have something to *hide*..."

Now furious, Linda stepped into the room fully and pointed to the door. "Out, Officer! You don't have a *warrant*, Walt is *obviously* not here, and now you're fishing for something *else*! I want you out of my house *now* or I'm gonna call and report you for an illegal search! *Out*!"

Knowing he couldn't continue to try and find the girl's cell phone to prove she was in on this odd conspiracy, Raul sighed in defeat and left the room, Linda following him to the front door. "Very well, Mrs. Grant. Please let us know if you hear anything."

As soon as the two were out of sight, Kathy knelt down. "Christina? Are you alright?"

Nodding, the trapped girl squirmed. "Yeah. I gotta go to the *bathroom*, though! *Bad*!"

Grimacing, Kathy was torn, knowing that if she let the girl out too soon she might get caught. "Just... try and hang on a few more minutes, OK?"

"OK." the girl replied. "Just... *hurry!* I don't know how long I can hold it!"

Running out into the living room, she saw her mother on the porch talking with the officers. Racing back to the dresser, she pulled on the drawer.

It wouldn't budge.

"Um... I can't open the drawer, Christina! Can you help from inside?"

Reaching up with her hands, the folded girl tried to push her fingers out of the drawer to pull, but there was no room. "I can't get my fingers out!"

Trying once more, Kathy pulled as hard as she could, giving a tiny space for Christina to get the slightest grip on the edge with her fingernails. With the added help, the drawer slid out slightly, just enough for Christina to slip her fingertips out and get a better grip. With another pull, the drawer slid out more, inching enough for Kathy to put her whole body weight against the drawer. With one last heave, the two managed to open it once more.

Climbing out carefully, trying not to wet herself, Christina was finally standing next to Kathy. "Thanks!" she whispered, wrapping the other girl in a tight hug with her legs crossed.

Hugging her back briefly, Kathy let go and ran back out to see if the coast was still clear. Seeing her mother still on the porch, but not the officers, she knew time was short. "Quick! Go!" she whispered.

Wasting no time, Christina walked with just her knees and feet, holding her thighs together as tightly as she could. Reaching the bedroom door, she quickly crossed the hallway into the bathroom and closed the door. Close to losing control, she quickly got her pants down and sat.

What she experienced next was the most wonderfully bizarre sensation of her life. Having not even *looked* at what was between her legs, and having

no experience at actually *being* a girl and all the physical complications involved, she nearly panicked at the simple act of going to the bathroom.

That was when she started to cry again, which made her cry even harder. *I am so sick of crying at everything! What is my deal? Why can't I control my feelings anymore?*

Heading out into the living room, Kathy slipped her phone out of the table drawer and into her pocket again just before her mother came back in. "So, what's their *deal*, Mom? Why was that guy looking in my drawers?"

Shaking her head, Linda closed the front door behind her. "He says you told him you lost your cell phone, but he thinks you still have it and were lying to him. *Did you?*"

"Did I lose my phone?" Kathy asked to buy time. "Um... yeah. Somewhere at school today. I'm *sorry* Mom! I wasn't gonna tell you! I was hoping I'd find in the Lost and Found tomorrow so I wouldn't get in trouble! Daddy told me that if I lost my phone, I wouldn't get another one 'til I was *sixteen!*"

Hearing what she believed to be a confession of the truth, Linda just looked at her with a frustrated smile. "Well, at least you didn't *lie* to me! OK! You see if it's in the Lost and Found tomorrow. If it *isn't* though, I'll get your dad to agree to give you a second chance. It won't be a *smartphone*, though! We'll dig out your old *flip* phone and you can use *that* until you learn to keep a better eye on where your *phone* is!"

Beaming at how nice her mother was being about the invented situation, Kathy hugged her quickly. "*Thanks*, Mom!"

"I just don't like you not having a phone if you *need* one!" Linda explained.

Pulling away quickly, Kathy backed away toward her room, not wanting to turn around as the phone in her back pocket would be easily visible. "Still, you're the best Mom ever!"

Heading toward the kitchen, Linda tried to get the whole situation with the police out of her head. Thinking of the Cocoran 'boy' being missing scared her more than she wanted her daughter to know. *He and Kathy have been close friends for so long!* "I'm going to start dinner, sweetie. Your homework done? If not you better get *at* it!"

Still backing away, even though her mother was turned away, Kathy crept her way toward her room. "No. I... I was worried about C... *Walt*... and then those *cops* came... so I better get started."

Hearing Kathy head off into her room, Linda sighed. *She doesn't seem that upset about Walt. In fact, she seems pretty unfazed about it, as though she...* Pausing mid-thought, the woman looked toward her daughter's room and remembered what Officer Martinez had said about Kathy's phone having been used by a girl named Christina who was trying to make people think she was Walt. *That's the truly weird part.* she pondered. *Christina is the name of that girl that her mother was asking if she could stay here a few days before canceling... and it's also what Kathy used to call Walt when they were toddlers. I wonder...*

Christina finally pulled up her jeans and baggy boxers. Having taken several minutes trying to figure out how to clean herself after going, she was finally satisfied she was dry enough and dressed. The experience was both amazing and terrifying. Having wanted that part of her to be like a girl for so long, and feeling uncomfortable about what she *used* to have there, finally having the body parts she'd always wanted still left her feeling mildly perverted for even touching it with toilet paper. It didn't even matter that it was her own body now; it somehow felt *wrong*.

Pushing those thoughts aside for the moment, Christina started toward the door after flushing when she caught sight of something out of the corner of her eye. Stopping, she turned and looked at herself in the mirror. It was the first time since waking up that she'd had the chance to see herself when she wasn't busy trying to survive.

The sight that greeted her was astonishing.

In place of the normal features she'd hated seeing in every mirror, her face was the exact image she had of herself in every dream she'd ever had. At the same time it was familiar, it was eerily disquieting to see it in her waking life in a real mirror. Unlike her dream self, the real thing looked a little dirty and her hair had become unkempt and scraggly. It was still naturally curly and a lovely golden yellow, but it was wild and unstyled. *I look like I've been living on the streets for a month already!*

Fascinated by the image in the mirror, Christina was hardly even aware that the bathroom door had opened.

"Oh!" Linda startled at the strange girl in her bathroom. "Who are you!?"

"*Walt!*" Kathy yelled as she saw her mother discovering their hidden guest.

"*Walt?*" Linda asked in confusion, turning to look at Kathy and then Christina in turn. "Alright, young lady! Who *are* you and where is *Walt!*? His parents are worried *sick!*"

"Mom!" Kathy interrupted. "That *is* Walt! She turned into *Christina* this morning, but no one will *believe* her except *me!*"

Trying to wrap her mind around what her daughter was saying, she watched as the strange girl in her bathroom descended through surprise, then shock, terror, and finally falling to the floor in wracking sobs.

Ten minutes later, the three of them sat at their dining room table; Kathy and Christina on one side, Linda on the other.

"You expect me to believe that Walter Cocoran, the boy who's been your best friend for eight *years*, just woke up this morning in the body of a *girl*? Do I *look* that gullible?"

"Mom!" Kathy whined. "You *gotta* believe me! It's *her*! I mean, *him*... No! I mean *her*! Walt *always* wanted to be a girl and she got her wish, but now her own *parents* don't *know* her! She never *told* them she wanted to be a girl, so now they won't *believe* her!"

Looking up slowly after drying her eyes, Christina looked at her best friend's mother. Sniffing back more tears, she took a frustrated breath, having to explain it all over again wearing on her heavily. "It's *true*, Mrs. Grant. I... I'm *Walt*... or at least, I *used* to be. I prayed every night for seven *years* to be a girl, and last night the angel Lisbeth gave me my *wish*, but didn't *tell* me that no one would know it was *me*!"

Hanging her head guiltily, she had to admit *everything*. "Well, she *did* give me the chance to ask her *questions* about it first, but... um... I didn't think to ask much of *anything* before *jumping* at the chance. I... I wanted it *so bad*, I didn't *think*! Ask me *anything*! I know everything I knew as Walt!"

Shocked that both this strange girl and her daughter were trying to tell her something as unbelievable as the idea that the sky was pink, Linda shook her head. "OK. What's your *name*?"

Sighing, she hated any time she had to say her given name. "Um... Walter Devon Cocoran is what my parents called me. *Really* though, I'm Christina Joy Cocoran. Kathy gave me the name Christina when we were little so I'd have a girl's name. I picked Joy because anytime I could be Christina, I was *happy*, but that was only ever in my *dreams*. When I was awake, all I could ever be was... was *Walt*."

Being a saleswoman for an electronics supply company, Linda was very good at reading people. She read every potential client she had and could tell when they were lying to her, when they were trying to downplay interest in her products, and a dozen other hidden body language clues. Everything she knew about subconscious social queues was telling her that Christina was telling her a truth she normally tried to hide. On top of her knowing it was Kathy who named her Christina, and what she'd suspected of her daughter's best friend for many years, led her to only one logical conclusion. The girl totally believed what she was saying and it all fit the facts... except one.

Boys don't magically change into girls overnight. *Ever.*

"Listen, I think you actually *believe* what you're saying, but..."

"So you *believe* her, Mom?" Kathy interrupted.

"I didn't *say* that, Kathy." Linda retorted. "I said I believe *she* believes it's true! People trick themselves into believing things that are impossible all the *time!*"

"Why do you say it's *impossible*, Mom? Didn't you tell me that angels are *real*? That they watch over us and help when they *can*? So why can't you believe that an angel helped *Christina*?"

Caught with her own words and beliefs, Linda considered the question. *Why can't I believe it? I know an angel saved my life that day. There's no way I could have gotten out of that car on my own, and I know someone opened the door and pulled me out before it started to burn, but no one was around for another minute or two, and by that time the car was burning and Daddy...*

Her thoughts turning sad at the memory of the day her father Henry died, she remembered all the justifications people told her back then for what must have *really* happened. The police investigator said that someone *must* have

been there, but they never came forward because they were a criminal... but Linda saw nobody there when she looked around after they put her down. Her emergency room doctor said that Linda *must* have opened her own door with a burst of adrenaline... but the accident had jammed it shut so tightly that it would have taken the Jaws of Life to open it.

In the end the only one to believe her was her *own* mother, Judy. She told Linda that since her father was killed instantly in the crash, it must have been him as an angel who had saved his only daughter. Linda had never stopped believing that.

"*Well, Mom?*" Kathy asked impatiently.

Shaking herself back to the present, Linda took a breath and let it out slowly before answering. "OK. You're *right*, sweetie. I *do* know that angels *are* real and help us when they can. But *this?*" She turned to the small girl looking like she was trying to be even smaller to avoid Linda's gaze.

"I wish I could take it *back*, but I *can't*." Christina mumbled as tears fell from her eyes. "I'm a *nobody* now! I might as well be *dead*! No one would even *miss* me! All they want is stupid *Walt*!"

"*No!*" Kathy screamed. "Don't even *think* that Christina! I *love* you!" Even as the words escaped her lips, Kathy's eyes went wide and she clapped her hand over her mouth in a vain effort to stop them after the fact.

Both Christina and Linda turned to Kathy in utter shock at her revelation. After a moment, Christina swallowed hard and asked, "You... you *love* me? I thought you loved *Walt*. You mean, like a best *friend*, right? Like a *sister*?"

Linda didn't need to hear her daughter's reply. She *knew*. She'd known for several months that her daughter was falling for her best friend and falling hard. It went beyond a simple crush. Their years of spending time together and the ease of their relationship just fed into the girl's attachment to 'Walt'.

With her having just started her first menstrual cycle that winter, her budding womanhood had made her see her best friend in the new light of attraction. Now she had transferred that growing love onto the girl who truly believed herself to be Walt, which meant her daughter's heart believed it *too*.

"Sweetie?" Linda probed delicately. "That's *not* what you meant, *was* it?"

Looking from one to the other, Kathy still held her hand over her lips, trying to decide who was right, unsure even herself. *Do... do I love Christina the way I loved Walt? I mean, how can I? Christina's a girl!* Realizing how much of a girl 'Walt' had always been, she found the internal argument silly. *What difference does it make what she looks like if she's still Walt? I... I mean... Christina! It wasn't Walt's body I loved, it was... it was her! I loved Christina the whole time! I just forgot she was there!* Suddenly in a mild bit of shock, Kathy panicked and ran to her room, terrified of her own feelings.

Looking down and resuming her self-loathing, Christina shook her head and began to cry again. "I just cause problems for *everyone!* Becoming me *killed* the boy Kathy loved, and she *can't* love *me* the same way! I... I gotta go!" At that she got up and started quickly toward the front door.

"*Christina!*" Linda shouted. "Stop! *Please!*" Chasing after the girl, she caught her just opening the door. "*No!* I can't *let* you leave! Not like *this!* You might do something... *terrible!*" Pushing the door closed, she took Christina in her arms and held her as the girl broke down and sobbed openly.

Wrapping her arms around the woman in a desperate need for comforting, Christina was devastated. *Kathy loves me, but she can't have me 'cuz I'm a girl like her and she doesn't like girls that way!* Remembering what Kathy had said about Samantha, a girl in their school who admitted she liked other girls, Christina was certain she'd put her best friend in the worst position possible; loving someone she could never have.

"It's OK, Christina!" Linda soothed her, petting the back of her head the way she did to her own daughter when she was upset. "*Shhh!* It's *OK!* It's not your *fault!* OK?"

Trying to calm down, Christina felt her fear and anxiety melt away in the woman's motherly embrace. *I wish this was Mother!* she thought. Accepting the affection nonetheless, the preteen just let go of her fears and relaxed into the moment, feeling safe and cared for as she cried heavy sobs.

While her mother consoled Christina's raw emotions, Kathy lay on her bed sobbing into her pillow. Holding it with the same desperation Christina held Linda, Kathy found herself wishing that the pillow was her best friend, but at the same time conflicted with that image in her mind; at once drawn and repulsed by the idea.

After several minutes, Linda felt Christina calm down and pull away. "Are you better now, Christina?"

Nodding, the girl wiped her cheeks. "Yeah. I'm OK now. Thanks."

Looking toward her daughter's bedroom, she desperately wanted to comfort her child, but was afraid to leave Christina alone in fear that she would leave and might even hurt herself. "Christina? I... I need to talk to Kathy, OK? I need to talk to her *alone*. Will you wait at the dining room table for me?"

Pressing her lips into a line, the depressed girl nodded glumly. "Yeah. I... I understand."

Shaking her head, Linda held Christina at arm's length by the shoulders. "No, I want you to *promise* that you'll wait at the table. OK?"

Looking at the floor, she shrugged and nodded. "OK. I promise. I'll wait at the table 'till you come out." Walking back to the dining room, she sat down sadly, wondering what new torture awaited her next.

Linda hesitated only a moment, looking at the sorrowful girl and wondering if she was doing the right thing in leaving her alone to attend to her daughter. Steeling herself, she turned away and headed for Kathy's room.

Hearing the gentle knock on her door as she continued to wrestle with her mixed emotions, Kathy shouted into her pillow. "Go *away!* Just leave me *alone!*"

Opening the door slowly, Linda saw her daughter stretched out on her bed face down. "Kathy, dear? I can't *do* that. We need to *talk* about this!"

"What's there to *talk* about?" the girl spat. "I'm a *freak!* An eleven year old *lesbian*, Mom! That's *Walt* out there, and I *love* him! *Her!* I love *her!* I... I *can't* love her, Mom! I just *can't!*"

Stepping into her daughter's room slowly, Linda wanted to comfort her, but felt there was nothing she could say to fix this problem. "It's *OK*, Kathy. I... I *know* how you feel about Walt. I've known for a while." Approaching the child's bed, she sat on it and ran her hand between the girl's shoulder blades, rubbing gently to try and sooth away Kathy's pain.

Her mother's mollifying tone and the feel of her near helped calm the girl enough to think more clearly. Sitting up, she turned and looked up into the woman's eyes; her view distorted by the wetness in her own. "That *is* Walt, Mom! I *know* you don't *believe* us, but I *know* it's her! I can *feel* it! She... she knows *everything* about him! And her *eyes!* I can *see* Walt in them! It's *her!*"

Taking a breath, Linda shook her head in her own disbelief at what she was about to say. "I... I *believe* you, sweetie. I know it's *insane*, but... I think I can see him in her *too!*"

Getting up, Kathy wrapped her arms around the woman's neck. "Oh *Mom!* What're we gonna *do?* She's *alone!* And *scared!* Her own *parents* didn't

believe her and called the *cops* on her and let them take her *away*! She doesn't have anywhere to *go*!"

Hugging her daughter and petting her head, Linda shook her head. "I... I don't *know*, sweetie! Honestly, I'm more concerned about *you* and what this must be *doing* to you! This is *obviously* very hard for you to handle. You're only eleven and dealing with things *far* too difficult even for us *grownups*! I... I wish I could tell you something that would *help*, but I just don't have any words that *will* help."

Hugging her even harder, Kathy relaxed some, content in the knowledge that at *least* her mother wasn't angry that she had such strong feelings for another girl and didn't think she was crazy for believing Christina's incredible story. "I... think I'd *die* if I *lost* her, Mom! I'd do *anything* to fix this for her, but I *can't*! I... I can't even deal with my *own* problems with her being a girl now, let alone *hers*! I... I *tried*, but they're just too *big*! What'll we *do*?"

Thinking a moment, Linda started going through everything she knew. After a moment, she broke the hug and looked at Kathy seriously. "*You're* the one that sent me that text from Marie Robbins, *aren't* you?"

Turning away embarrassedly, Kathy nodded in admission. "I'm *sorry*, Mom! I... I just didn't know what else to *do*! She had nowhere to *go*! You *know* that the cops are looking for her. They think she knows where *Walt* is. She snuck away from them when they took her to the hospital."

Parsing the situation, one part still didn't make sense. "OK. So why did you say she was going to her uncle's house? I already said she could stay a few days. You fooled me *completely*, which we'll deal with that *later*." she added with just a hint of irritation and menace.

Kathy shrugged. "Christina *made* me. She didn't like my lying to you and pointed out you'd be suspicious that she didn't have any other clothes and stuff. She has *nothing*, Mom! Even the *clothes* she's wearing she got from a

donation bin! I think the only thing she has that's *hers* is Walt's *underwear*! Can I give her my old outfits from last year so she has *something*?"

Nodding in understanding, Linda pursed her lips. "Walt always *was* honest to a fault. He... um... *she*... wouldn't let you get away with much! It's one of the biggest reasons I let hi... *her*... hang around you so much, even though he was a boy. I thought he'd be a good influence on you!" Thinking a moment, she added, "I think it'd be OK to give her some of your old outfits. I was going to donate them when the box was full *anyway*."

Making the girl smile a little, knowing Christina had at least *one* grownup on her side, Kathy's smile melted quickly. "Um... what am *I* gonna do, Mom? I mean, Walt's a *girl* now! I mean, she was *always* a girl, but now she's a *girl-girl*! I can't be in *love* with her! I just *can't*! But I *am*!"

Smirking slightly at the girl's innocent selfishness in the face of much bigger problems, Linda was blunt. "Why *can't* you love her, sweetie? It's not like you have much of a *choice* in the matter! The heart wants what the heart wants! You can't just turn it *off*! Did you love Walt's *body* or who he... *she*... was... *is*... as a *person*?"

Having her own internal debate asked out loud helped Kathy parse the issue. "Um... I love *her*! The person Walt always *was*! But now she's in a girl's *body*! When she was *Walt* I could have *done* something about it. *Now*? I... I just *can't*, Mom! I... I don't *like* girls that way!"

Sighing, Linda shook her head. "What exactly *were* you going to 'do about it', sweetie?"

Suddenly embarrassed, Kathy turned away and looked at her nightstand. "Um... *you* know! *Stuff*! Maybe getting her to *notice* me? *Dating*? *Stuff*!"

Using her fingertip, Linda turned her daughter's head to face her once more. "You don't need to be *ashamed* of how you *feel*, sweetie! How does... um... does Christina feel about *you*?"

With a shrug, Kathy looked at her lap. "I... I *told* her how I felt about Walt before we came home. She said she never thought of me that way before. Now I just like, *confessed* in front of *both* of you that I *still* love her, even though she's in a girl's *body* now. I... I just don't know how I feel about *that* part. It's not like Walt was a *hunk* or anything! I mean, she was *cute*, but that's not why I *loved* her! It was because she was so *nice*... and *sweet*... and... and..." Sighing heavily and dreamily, she smiled. "...and *wonderful*!"

Taking her daughter into another hug, Linda held her for a moment while she sorted out what to say. "Well, what you do *now* is up to *you*, sweetie. There's no reason why you *can't* date her though, if you *want* to. Once you're *old* enough, that is! Eleven is a *little* young to start a serious relationship! But *honestly* sweetie, you're not the *first* girl to have the problem! A *lot* of girls have found themselves falling for someone who they weren't necessarily *attracted* to. When I first met your *father* he was... well... sort of... um... *geeky*, if you can believe it! Why don't you just give it *time*? See how you feel in a few months when you both turn twelve? How does *that* sound?"

Swallowing hard even at the idea of dating another girl, she saw the wisdom in her mother's words. "OK, Mom. Thanks."

"Feeling *better* now?"

Kathy nodded and stood up along with her mother. "Yeah. I feel *bad*, though! Here Christina is dealing with *huge* problems and I'm worried about *me*!"

Heading toward the bedroom door with her arm around Kathy's shoulder, Linda laughed lightly. "It's *natural*, sweetie! You're still just a little *girl* and this is a *big* problem! I'll help how I *can*, though! OK?"

Smiling up at her mother, Kathy knew that somehow, someday, her mom would find a way to make it all work out. "Thanks, Mom! I know she'll appreciate the..."

As she was about to finish, Kathy looked at the living room with the dining room table visible just beyond. What she noticed first was the silence. That's when she noticed what she *wasn't* seeing.

Christina was gone.

Chapter 6 - Friends in Need

Sitting at the Grant's dining room table, Christina felt the weight of her change weighing on her more with each passing minute. *Kathy is still in love with me, but she can't even face me! Mother and Daddy don't even know me, I have no future, no past... no hope. If I didn't promise Mrs. Grant I'd wait, I would just leave.* Biting her lower lip, she waited.

When the front door opened, the girl jumped in a start. Seeing Mr. Grant come in, the two locked eyes for a moment before Christina looked down.

"Hello!" George Grant greeted the new girl as he closed the door. "Are you a friend of Kathy's?"

With a shy nod, Christina stared at her lap. "She's in her room, talking to Mrs. Grant. She asked me to wait here."

Looking at his watch, George shook his head. "It's getting kind of late. You should be getting home... uh... what's your name?"

"Christina." she mumbled. "I promised Mrs. Grant I'd wait here until she was done talking to Kathy."

Pursing his lips, George shook his head. "Well, I think you should be getting home, Christina. It's seven-thirty. Don't worry! I'll explain to Linda... Mrs. Grant. Whatever it is, it'll wait until tomorrow." Walking over to the door, he put his hand on the knob and looked at her expectantly.

Getting up reluctantly, Christina made her way over to the door and looked up at the man she'd known almost as long as her own father, and loved nearly as much. "I shouldn't leave without Mrs. Grant saying it's OK, Mr. Grant. I *promised* her!"

Opening the door, George smiled but was stern. "Go on *home*, Christina."

Walking out the door, the girl heard it close behind her, heading down the walkway and down the street, nowhere to go as the sun began to set and her tears began to fall.

"What do you mean you told her to go *home*?" Linda yelled. "Christina has nowhere to go, George!"

Her husband was stunned. After he told Christina to go home, he went to his bedroom to change out of his work clothes. He'd just finished changing when he heard the commotion in the living room. Hearing his daughter Kathy yelling at his wife, he'd charged out to put a stop to it. What he'd seen baffled him. His wife stood there speechlessly with tears rolling down her cheeks while Kathy berated her and the woman just took it.

After getting Kathy to calm down, she told him the argument was all about Christina leaving. When he told Kathy that *he* was the one to make the girl go home, it was Linda who'd turned on him.

"How was *I* supposed to know that, Linda!" he shouted back. "You didn't call or text me to say Kathy had a *guest* over tonight! It's a *school* night! She's *never* allowed to have friends over on a school night!"

"Christina's a special *case*!" Linda shouted. Calming down, the woman tried to explain in a way that he wouldn't think was insane. "Her... her parents aren't *available*. I'm sorry I didn't let you know, but it was all last-minute!"

Shrugging, George didn't look concerned. "OK, so call her and tell her to come *back*! I'll explain that it was *my* fault and..."

"Christina doesn't have a *cell phone*, Daddy!" Kathy shouted. "We *can't* call her! Who knows *where* she went! She couldn't go *home*!"

"Why didn't *she* tell me that?" he snapped.

"It... it's *complicated*, dear." Linda hedged. "Her... her parents are having... *problems*. I said she could stay *here*. We've got to *find* her, George! In her state, she might *hurt* herself!"

"We should call the police." he stated simply as he headed for the phone.

"*No!*" both Kathy and Linda shouted together.

Stopping short, he looked at them as if they'd both gone crazy. "Look, what's going *on* here? Why don't you want me calling the police? That's what they're *there* for!"

Stepping up calmly, Linda tried to explain without explaining. "George? Do you *trust* me?"

"Of *course* I do!" he answered, hurt that she would even have to ask.

"Then I'm asking you to do what I ask *without* knowing why. When did she leave?"

"Right after I got home. About fifteen minutes ago."

Grabbing her purse, she headed toward the door. "I need you to get in your car and start looking for her, George! I'll take mine. Kathy? You stay here in case she comes *back!*"

Wanting to help look, Kathy ran up to her. "I wanna come *with* you Mom!"

"No!" Linda shouted. "You *have* to stay! If she comes back, you need to be here to make sure she doesn't *leave* again! *Please*, sweetie! The more time we waste, the worse our chances of *finding* her before..." Pausing, she tried to say what she feared without scaring Kathy. "...before she gets in *trouble!*"

Nodding, Kathy backed away while her mother ran out the door, George right behind her after grabbing his keys and wallet. Once they were gone, Kathy went over to sit by the phone and began to pray while she cried. *God? Please don't let Christina get hurt! I'll do anything! You can have me instead! Please! I'm begging you! Protect her?*

Walking the few blocks to her parents' house, Christina didn't know where else to go. Standing outside her home, she watched in the windows, hiding in the bushes. She could see the strange car parked on the street, occasionally seeing a couple of strange men walking around her living room like they were searching for something. When she saw her mother Ruth, she nearly cried at how distraught the woman looked.

Hearing a car coming, she ducked further out of sight until it passed slowly. Peeking out, she saw it was Kathy's mother's car. She was about to come out to wave her down when her front door opened, sending her back into hiding.

"Try not to worry, Mrs. Cocoran." one of the men tried to reassure her. "We have this Christina person's fingerprints, as well as video and pictures taken at the hospital. Whoever's behind your son's disappearance, the girl is the key to finding them *and* Walter. We have pictures of her out to every officer in the area. One of them is *bound* to spot her sooner or later."

"Thank you, Agent Stewart." David responded as he held Ruth, who looked like a hollow shell. "We'll be here if you need us for anything."

Watching the two FBI agents leave, Christina turned and saw her parents still standing outside their door. When the agents' car finally pulled away, the two turned and went back inside.

Remaining in her hiding place, Christina cried for her lost life and home, as well as for her devastated parents. Remaining there for some uncounted time, the darkness of the night deepening, the girl slowly started walking away, not even sure where she was going.

Christina found herself behind a supermarket in a strip mall. Smelling the food from the restaurant next door, her stomach growled as she thought how that simple sandwich and glass of milk might be the only meal she would have for some time. Spotting a cardboard box that must have been for a stand-up freezer, she headed toward it; the heat of the late spring day sapping away in the dry desert air and turning cold.

Tipping the box over, she crawled inside it and pulled the flaps closed behind her. Crawling to the far end, she leaned on the bottom until the box tipped back upright, spilling her on her head and making her dizzy. Sitting down in the bottom of the box, she settled in, laced her fingers together, and closed her eyes.

God? It... it's me... Christina. I'm an idiot! I thought becoming a girl would make me happy, but it's terrible! I have no home, no family, no past, and no future! I've tried all day to be good, but it's just getting harder! Everything always goes wrong! I don't want to complain, because this is what I always wanted... being myself, I mean... but it's too hard! I don't know what to do! If I get caught, the police are gonna throw me in jail for helping kidnap me! No one'll believe me if I tell 'em the truth, so I'll probably end up in a foster home! Even if it's not like on TV or in the movies, it still won't be with Mother and Daddy, and they'll be heartbroken when I never come home!

Sighing in defeat, she continued. *I know praying isn't supposed to be all about me, so can you do something for me? Can you make Mother and Daddy not be so sad? I know you can't like, make them forget me, but can you maybe give them happy dreams of having Walt back? That way they at least get a little time with the son they really love... not me.*

Anyway, I guess I should thank you for letting Lisbeth make me a girl, so... um... thanks... I guess. It's my fault it turned out so terrible. I guess I wasn't a good enough girl. I'll try to be one from now on. I promised, though I don't know how long I can be good alone. I love you, God. Amen.

With nothing else to say and nearly exhausted from walking and lack of food, she curled into a ball to stay warm, crying herself to sleep.

It would be the second night in a row that Christina would be watched over by unseen eyes as she slept.

Walking through the same field of wildflowers as the night before, Christina wandered aimlessly. Usually when she would dream, because she was always herself, she would invariably be happy. This time though she walked without purpose or enjoying being a girl.

After some time, she heard footsteps running up behind her. Turning quickly, she saw Officer Martinez running straight at her. Terrified, she froze in place. Just as he got close, he jumped to catch her and flew right through her body as though she wasn't there. Turning around, she was once more alone in the field, her heart pounding.

Breaking into a run, Christina ran and ran. It seemed like hours went by and still the only thing she could see was wildflowers, as though she hadn't gone anywhere. Stopping to catch her breath, she sat down and breathed heavily. Once calmed down, she looked up to see a strange man looking at her. It startled her, but at the same time he didn't seem dangerous, and in fact looked familiar somehow.

"Who are *you*?" she asked tentatively.

"No one you'd know, Christina." he answered. "Just a friend. Why were you running away?"

"Officer Martinez was gonna catch me." she explained. "I... I don't know why he *didn't*. It was like he just *disappeared* when he tried."

Smiling gently, the man walked up to her and held out a hand.

Taking it nervously, Christina felt him pull her to her feet with ease, her exhaustion suddenly gone and she felt refreshed. "What's your name?"

"You can call me Hank." he smiled down at her.

As the two began to stroll together through the flowers, she looked up at him several times before settling on what she wanted to ask him.

"Yes. I *am*." he answered with a smile before she asked.

Stopping suddenly, Christina stepped back away from him in fear. "You... you're an *angel*? Like *Lisbeth*?"

Wincing slightly at her reaction, Hank took a breath and blew it out slowly. "Not *exactly*. Lisbeth has *always* been an angel. She doesn't know what it's like to be a *person*. I... well... I was a *man* once. That's why I know how to talk to you with *words*!"

Her fear diminishing, she stepped closer to him again. "Can... can you *undo* it? Turn me back into *Walt*? It... it's too *hard* being a girl! I lost *everything*!"

Looking down sadly, Hank shook his head. "I'm sorry, Christina. No, I *can't*. Lisbeth *told* you as much. Once a miracle has been performed, it's because God *wanted* it to happen. For whatever reason, He *wanted* you to be a boy that got turned into a girl through a miracle. Who knows *why*, but I know to *trust* Him on these things!"

"But I could have said *no*!" she pointed out. "If God *wanted* me to be turned into a girl, why did He give me a *choice*?"

"Because you *could* have said no." he explained vaguely. "He values free will over almost *everything*, even His plans for people. If you'd have said no, you would have stayed Walt and not gone down the path that He wanted for you

to follow. That's *always* your choice. That's what makes us different from everything else in the world. We can *choose*. Everything else is *His* doing."

Not able to really follow what Hank was telling her, she looked up at him again. "So... why're you *here* then?"

Hank seemed lost in memory for a moment. "Someone I care about very much asked Him to watch out for you. Make sure you stayed safe."

"Who?"

Looking at the infinite horizon, Hank remembered the day he died. Suddenly the field of flowers was gone and the two stood on a street next to a wrecked car, rain falling all around them but neither one getting wet.

As Christina watched, a second version of Hank ran from around the car and almost ripped the door off its hinges, the sound of metal groaning before it popped open with a crack. Reaching in, the double came back out with a girl in his arms. Carrying her a short distance away from the car that had just started to burn, he put the crying and dazed girl down gently on the grass nearby and vanished as though he'd never been there.

Staring at the girl as she fruitlessly looked around for her savior, Christina noticed that she looked a lot like Kathy, but not quite the same. "Who... who's *that*?" she asked vacantly.

"My daughter Linda." Hank replied. "This was the day I died... and *she* very nearly did as well."

Confused, Christina slowly walked up to the sobbing girl who didn't seem to notice her. Looking carefully, Christina turned back to look at Hank. "Is that Mrs. Grant when she was *little*?"

Nodding, Hank walked up, took Christina's hand, and once more they were in the field of wildflowers. "You're a pretty smart young lady! You're also empathetic and compassionate. I know what my granddaughter *sees* in you!"

Pulling her hand away, Christina turned away from him. "I... You should *go*. You should watch over *her*. She deserves someone *better* than me! I didn't even *think* how me becoming a girl might hurt her! I'm a selfish *monster*!"

Putting his hands on her shoulders, Hank gently turned her around and sank down to his knees to look her in the eyes. "Christina! Now you *know* that's not true! You're a very kind and considerate young lady, and Kathy *loves* you because you *earned* that love. You becoming a girl doesn't *change* that."

"But I *hurt* her, Hank!" she cried. "Me being a girl *hurts* her *and* my parents! I didn't think about *any* of them when I said yes! I just thought about *myself* and what *I* wanted! What kind of a person does that *make* me?"

Laughing, he hugged the girl warmly. "It makes you *human*, Christina! You *hurt* every time you saw yourself as Walt. Many girls like you become bitter, angry, jealous, and even make a *mockery* of their feminine gift. Others let the hurt rule them and take their own lives. You... you were *special*. You never let the pain tear you down, even when it was *intolerable*."

Pulling away a little, she looked at him curiously. "How do *you* know all that about me? How long have you been watching *over* me?"

"I knew all that the moment I touched your hand." he answered. "Every time you hurt, it burned into your soul and I could feel every *one* of them. You have an *amazing* strength! You never let the hurt corrupt your *heart*."

Shyly looking down, Christina blushed at the compliment. "Thanks." After a moment, she looked up at him again. "So... *now* what happens?"

Smiling, Hank let her go and stood up, backing away. "Now you rest, wake up, forget all this, and go back to my daughter's home. She was up half the night looking for you. I'll keep you safe until morning. Just *rest*."

Getting a sleepy feeling again, Christina lay down in the flowers and watched Hank looking down at her, closing her eyes and feeling safe.

The loud bang of the garbage truck emptying the dumpster only ten feet from her hiding place woke Christina with a start. Her heart racing, she looked up to see sunlight peaking in from the mostly closed flaps of the box she'd slept in. Her body was sore and her stomach ached from lack of food, but it wasn't long before she heard the clamorous truck drive away and the only noise she could hear was the distant sound of traffic.

Leaning on the side of the box, it once more tipped over so that she was on all fours and able to crawl toward the opening. Peering out carefully, she saw no one around and quickly climbed out. Feeling like she'd just closed her eyes, she was surprised that she didn't remember her dreams like she usually did. Reaching into her front pocket, she retrieved the change she'd found the day before.

"Sixty cents." she grumbled. "That wouldn't even get me a *taco*!" Wondering where she could go to get something to eat, the only place she could think of was the *last* place she'd eaten. *Kathy's house*. she sighed inwardly. Starting to walk without a destination in mind, she felt guilty for not going back to their house last night. *Maybe that's why she was driving around... looking for me. Mrs. Grant understands, and I think she actually believes me that I used to be Walt! For a grownup, that's pretty amazing!*

Before she realized it, she noticed she was walking back to Kathy's house without thinking. Lacking any better ideas, and weary of her circumstances, she continued her journey until at last she stood in front of the home once more. Almost unconsciously, she knocked on the front door.

Kathy ate her cereal in silence. Last night had been horrible. She waited by the phone for hours without word, crying and praying. When her father came back at ten o'clock, he called Kathy's mother, who insisted on continuing her search well into the night. When she got home at two in the morning, Kathy was asleep on the couch next to the phone, George snoring next to her.

Taking another bite, Kathy looked across the table at her parents. Her mother looked ragged and worn, having gotten too little sleep, while her father just appeared worried. Finishing her bite, Kathy sighed. "You think she's OK?"

Looking over at Linda, her father furrowed his brow. "I... I don't really *know*, sweetie. I don't know if *any* of us are OK."

"*George!*" Linda almost whined. "Are we going to go through this *again*? I *tell* you, that girl is *Walt*! As crazy as that *sounds*, I know it's *true!*"

"Changed into a girl by an *angel*, Linda?" he scoffed.

"*Yes!*" she insisted. "Just the same way my life was *saved* by one, *George!* You *said* you believed me when I told you that story when we first started *dating!* Was that a *lie?*"

Caught in a trap of his own words, he just sat there a moment, relieved when there was a knock at the door. "*I'll* get it!" he jumped up and ran for the door. Opening it, he looked down and saw Christina standing there, disheveled, pale, drawn, and with dark circles under her wide eyes.

Seeing the man who'd made her leave the night before at the door, Christina started to back away. "I... I'm sorry, Mr. Grant! I'll *go!*"

"*Wait!*" he yelled softly, running after her and stopping her retreat by gently grabbing her arm. "*Please!* Come inside, Christina."

Hesitantly, she let him guide her back into the house. When she saw Kathy sitting at the table eating breakfast, she looked away from her in shame and self-loathing.

Linda jumped out of her seat when she saw George escorting Christina in. "My *God*, Christina!" she cried, running up to the girl and wrapping her in her arms. "What *happened* to you! Where *were* you?"

Hearing her best friend's new name, Kathy turned in her seat quickly to see Christina standing in front of her father George. Shock overwhelmed her at the sight of the girl. She looked emaciated and like someone had kicked her into a gutter. Seeing her mother embrace the girl with the thousand-yard stare, Kathy slowly got up, her tears barely held at bay.

Overwhelmed, Christina accepted the affection and hugged her back, albeit weakly. "I... I found a box in back of a strip mall. I slept in there. I'm sorry you were worried. I... I didn't think you *wanted* me here." She glanced up at George with a look of fear. "You shouldn't worry about *me*. *Kathy's* the one who got hurt by what I *did*."

Quickly examining her, Linda satisfied herself that the girl was unharmed, though in need of a bath, clean clothes, and a meal. "It's alright, Christina! We *care* about you! You look *starved*! When's the last time you *ate*?"

Looking over at Kathy, she swallowed hard. "Um... yesterday afternoon. I... I had a sandwich with Kathy after she got home from school."

Seeing there was more to it, Linda pressed. "And before *that*?"

"Um... the night *before*... when I was still... um... *you* know."

"When she was *Walt*." Kathy finished for her, stepping closer. "Christina? Are... are you *OK*?"

Nodding, she looked away embarrassedly. "I'm fine. I was kinda *sore* this morning, though."

"It was in the low sixties this morning." George pointed out. "Too cold for just sleeping in a box."

"You didn't cover yourself with anything, *did* you, sweetheart?" Linda asked.

"The box was *closed*." she pointed out. "There were *holes* in it, though."

Taking the girl by the hand, she started toward the bathroom. "Come on sweetie. We're gonna get you a warm bath."

"What about *work*, honey?" her husband asked.

"I think the family just came down with a twenty-four-hour *cold*, George!" she answered without stopping. "Make the calls. I'm going to need your level head today! We have a lot of things to figure *out*!"

Guiding the new girl into the bathroom, she noticed part of the stink on her was that at some point in the night Christina had wet herself. It had dried quickly in the desert air, but the smell lingered. "It's OK, sweetie. I know you had an... *accident*. We'll take care of things, *OK*?"

Nervous, Christina looked at the bathtub. "Um... Mrs. Grant? I... I've never seen a girl *naked* before! Not even *me*! I've only ever gone to the bathroom *once* since all this happened, and even then I didn't *look*!"

Pausing after she started the water running, she looked at the girl curiously. "Oh! Um... *no*... I guess you *wouldn't* have, *would* you?" Realizing that it also meant the poor child had no idea how to take care of herself as a girl and knew *nothing* about feminine hygiene, she resolved to teach her what she needed to know. "Sweetie? There's some things about being a girl you need to know, *OK*?"

"I know *some* stuff, Mrs. Grant." she admitted shyly.

"Not *enough*." she stressed. "OK, we'll *start* with the fact that since you *are* a girl, looking at your own body isn't *dirty*, OK? You *need* to be able to look at yourself to make sure you're *clean*. So we'll start with getting *undressed*."

Gulping, Christina knew she was right. *I gotta be able to look at myself and know that it's OK. It's not like I can go my whole life and never get naked!* Sitting down, she removed her worn shoes and socks. Taking a breath, she closed her eyes and pulled the dirty pink top over her head. Cracking her eyes open, she saw Linda standing there looking at her expectantly.

"Pants and underwear, *too*?"

"Do you know *another* way to take a bath, sweetie?"

When she looked down at her jeans, even the thought of taking them off nearly made her hyperventilate; images of Doctor Ramsey undressing her filling her mind.

Seeing the girl begin to panic, Linda knelt down in front of her. "It's *OK*, Christina! You're *safe*! What's *wrong*, sweetie?"

Explaining about the hospital, Christina took a breath. "When I changed behind the donation bin, I was in such a hurry and so scared I didn't even *think* about it and kept my eyes closed! *Now* when I think about taking off my pants, I just see his *face*! What's *wrong* with me?"

Taking the girl's hands, she tried to calm her down. "*Nothing's* wrong with you, Christina! It was a traumatic experience! Do you want me to *leave*? Would that make it *easier*?"

Thinking about it, she nodded. "I think it *would*, Mrs. Grant. Is that OK?"

Nodding in understanding, Linda stood up. "I'll be right outside, OK? Once you're in the tub, I'm going to *have* to tell you how to clean yourself, so I'll have to come in when you get more comfortable with yourself. Understand?"

"Yeah." she sighed. "I'll try to be quick."

Exiting the bathroom, Linda stood outside the door and waited. After a few moments, she saw her husband approaching.

"What's *wrong*, honey?" he asked concernedly.

"Christina's never seen her body *naked* or bathed as a *girl*." she explained. "She's getting undressed and in the tub so I can tell her how to *clean* herself. Still think it's *crazy*?"

"More than *ever*." he shook his head. "This is *nuts*, Linda! I don't mean *you* or Kathy, or even *Christina*... I mean the whole *situation*! What kind of sick joke *is* this! *Assuming* she's telling the truth, what kind of miracle is *this*? Ripping the child out of her home? No *birth* record? How's she supposed to get into *school*? What about a *job* later? This is *insane*!"

"I *know*!" Linda admitted. "That's why she's gonna need *your* help, George."

The man's face fell like a stone. "No! You aren't *suggesting*..."

"What *choice* does she have, love?" Linda argued. "You're the only one who could *do* something about her *biggest* issue... no *birth* record!"

"It's *illegal*!" he shouted in a whisper. "I could go to *prison*, Linda!"

"She needs our *help*, George! You work in the Bureau of Vital Records! Who would *know*? Couldn't you do it so it can't be traced back to *you*?"

Thinking for a moment, he thought of several ways to insert a birth record into the system in such a way as to leave no trace that he'd been the one to do it. Shaking his head in disgust at the idea, he got mildly angry that she would suggest it. "It's *wrong*, Linda! Even if I could get *away* with it, it's still *wrong*! It's *fraud*! Besides, who do we say her *parents* are, *huh*? From what *you* told me, Ruth and David weren't exactly *open* to the idea!"

"That was when she was telling them *alone* with no one to support her *story*, George!" she countered. "If *we* go to them, tell them she really *is* Walt, don't you think they'd at least *listen* to her?"

"Or they might think *we* took Walt!" he pointed out. "Linda, this could *ruin* us! We're talking federal *prison* here! For *kidnapping*! Maybe even human *trafficking*!"

"Don't they need *Walt* for that? How can they *prove* we did anything if he's just *gone* and never *seen* again?"

"What if she *isn't* Walt?" he countered. "What if he shows *up*? *Then* what?"

"She *is*! I know it in my *heart*! She doesn't know *anything* about actually *being* a girl! She almost had a *panic* attack just taking off her *pants*! More importantly, *Kathy* knows it." Explaining that their daughter had been falling for her best friend, and how that love had transferred to Christina, she sighed. "She's *Walt*, and *Kathy* *loves* her, George. I saw this *coming*... her feelings for Walt, I mean."

Absorbing this new information, George's head spun. "OK, that only means that *Kathy* believes she's Walt. She's *eleven*!"

"So's *Christina*, George! Do you think she's some sort of junior *con* artist?"

"Mrs. Grant?" came the girl's voice from the bathroom. "I... I'm *ready* now."

Giving her husband a look, she whispered, "We'll finish this *later!*"

Walking back out into the living room, George sat back down at the table with his daughter to talk about her relationship with Christina.

Knocking gently, Linda opened the door. "Coming in." she announced before entering. Looking at the tub as she closed the door behind her, she saw the girl in the steaming warm water covering her chest with her arms. Taking a breath, she pressed forward. *We've got a lot to do!*

Chapter 7 - Homecoming

An hour later, Christina emerged from the bathroom clean, in new clothes that used to be Kathy's, and with her hair dry and styled nicely. Making her way over to the dining room table, she saw no one there.

"Um... where's Kathy?" she asked nervously. "*School?*"

"In the *kitchen!*" her best friend answered loudly. "Daddy and I are making you something to *eat!*"

Smelling eggs, bacon, and toast, Christina's mouth watered so much it ached. Following her nose, she entered the kitchen and saw George and Kathy at the stove, Kathy giggling at something her father had just said. "Kathy?"

Turning quickly, the girl wasn't wearing the jeans and T-shirt Christina had seen her wearing before her bath. She'd changed into a cute top and knee-length skirt that made her look a little older and a lot more attractive. Smiling at the sight that greeted her, the sadness that had seemed to surround her since Christina's transformation seemed to have melted away. "*Christina!* You look *gorgeous!*" she stated dreamily.

Blushing, the girl looked down at herself. It had taken her quite some time in the bathroom to just strip down and look at herself. After a few minutes of anxiety, she started to get used to seeing her body as her own and climbed into the tub. When Kathy's mother came in and explained how to wash her new body, and a lot of other things she should have learned long ago as a girl, she found it easier to be around her while undressed. By the time Linda suggested the new outfit, Christina agreed and let the woman stay in the room as she dressed, accepting help as needed.

Looking down at the white blouse and cute black skirt she wore, Christina sighed with a kind of contentment she'd never known in her life. "You really *like* it, Kathy?" she probed hesitantly.

Looking at her best friend, Kathy felt a tingling in her tummy like when she would think of her best friend when she was called Walt. Now she felt it again, this time with the girl Christina had become. "Y... yeah, Christina! You look *totally* adorable!"

"You *too*!" Christina replied shyly.

Scraping some scrambled eggs onto a plate with four strips of bacon and a small slice of toast, George picked up the plate. "Grab the milk, pumpkin?" he asked his daughter.

Tearing her eyes away from Christina, she complied, pulling the milk out of the refrigerator and grabbing a glass from the cupboard. Following her parents and friend to the table, she set the glass down and poured it for her. "*Here* you go, Christina! I hope you *like* it!"

Seeing the food, she wanted to dive in and devour it quickly, but somehow restrained herself and took a normal bite of eggs, which even when she had been Walt was always small. Savoring the flavor that struck her as more full and rich than any eggs she'd ever eaten, she picked up a slice of bacon and bit into it, the salty tang mixing perfectly with the eggs and making her eyes roll back in her head. Chewing and swallowing, she took a drink. "This is *so good*, Mr. Grant! I don't think I've *ever* eaten eggs this good before!"

Raising an eyebrow, he smirked. "I didn't do anything *special* to them."

Watching Christina eat, Kathy smiled. "She did the same thing yesterday when I made her a peanut butter sandwich! She said it's probably because she's never really *eaten* anything before!"

Linda joined the three at the table after returning the milk to the fridge, putting a bowl of mixed fruit down next to Christina's plate.

"Why don't we give Christina a chance to *eat*, George?" Nodding toward their bedroom, she hoped he would take the hint.

Looking at his wife curiously, he furrowed his brow in confusion, but got up anyway; the two of them disappearing down the short hallway toward their room without a word.

Finally alone again, Kathy turned back to her guest. "I was *really* worried about you last night, Christina. I mean, *really* worried! I... I thought I might never *see* you again, and... um... it made me decide some things."

Finishing another bite, the girl turned to her. "Like what *kind* of things?"

Taking a breath and remembering the things her father talked to her about while Christina had taken her bath, as well as what her mother had said the evening before, she forged ahead. "Um... well, you *know* how I felt about you when you were *Walt*, and then last night I sorta let it slip out that I *still* feel that way about you the way you *are*."

Taking another breath as Christina stopped eating to listen, the girl continued. "Well, I sorta *freaked* when I did that. I never thought about another girl like that before. Then the more I *thought* about it, and after talking to Mom, I realized you were *always* a girl, even when you *were* Walt. It'd be *shallow* of me to... to *love* you when you were stuck being Walt and then *not*... um... *love* you... now that you can be *yourself*... the person I *really* loved."

Swallowing hard, Christina realized what Kathy was saying. "Um... so you... you still... um... *love* me? Even though I'm a *girl* now?"

Scooting a little closer, Kathy smiled shyly. "Um... *yeah*. I'm *really* glad you can be *yourself* now, Christina! I... I remember how much *fun* we used to have before I stopped calling you that! I mean, we *still* had fun when you were stuck as *Walt*, but... I mean... you were a little more... *free* back then."

Taking another bite, Christina tried to think about how she felt about Kathy. *She's my best friend.* she mused. *Kathy's always been with me. When we started Kindergarten together and we went out to recess that first day, Miss Carter suggested I go play with the boys, but they were playing some dumb kickball game and I didn't want to. That's when Kathy took my hand and led me over to play jump rope with Beth and them. She made me so happy!*

Remembering a dozen other times Kathy had been there for her when she was stuck in a boy's body, Christina felt that warm feeling in her belly once more. Looking over at the other girl, she felt a pang of regret that she hadn't seen sooner how much Kathy cared for her. She had always *liked* the girl, but before yesterday she was almost considered 'off limits' to Christina. *But now?* she asked herself.

Pausing her breakfast, she took a drink to collect her thoughts. Turning once more to Kathy, she cleared her throat. "Um... Kathy? I... I was *thinking*, I've always *really* liked you! You're like, my best friend! I... I'm *scared* to try being *more* than that, because if something were to happen and we broke up, I'd lose *more* than my... um... girlfriend. I'd lose my best friend *too!*"

Hearing what she took to be Christina letting her down easy, Kathy scooted away again. "It's *OK*, Christina." she lied sadly. "I understand. I mean, you just like me like a *friend!* Like... like a... um... a *sister.*" Inside her heart ached and her feelings nearly overwhelmed her.

Scooting closer once more, Christina took Kathy's hand. "Well, not like a *sister!* I like you *more* than as a friend, or even a *best* friend! I *am* scared to try being *more*, but I think I'm *more* scared to *not* try!"

Overcome with joy, Kathy brought their joined hands up to her lips and delicately kissed the back of Christina's hand. Afraid to try anything else, she just reveled in the feeling for a moment.

Feeling Kathy's lips on her skin, Christina felt a rush of pleasure unlike any she'd ever imagined, but not a small amount of fear. *What if we break up? I won't just lose a girlfriend, I'll lose my best friend and the only people in the whole world that believe who I am!* Pulling her hand free with a weak smile, she sighed. "K...Kathy? Can we go *slow*? I... I know you like me *way* more than I like you! I... I just need some time to catch *up*, OK? I'm still trying to get *used* to all this!"

Smiling that she at least had a chance, Kathy nodded. "I understand! I... I'll *try*! You make it kinda *hard*, though! You're just *too* nice!"

Sighing contentedly, Christina returned to eating her breakfast.

After a few minutes, Kathy's parents came back out of their bedroom, having spent the time continuing their debate over what to do about Christina.

George looked at the small girl eating at his dining room table and wondered. *Is it possible? Can that girl be Walt, the boy who's been in and out of here since Kathy was three?* Watching the girl eat, the only thing even close to similar was the small bites she took. *All girls eat like that!* he dismissed the notion, but in addition to Christina's behavior growing up, it did make him consider that maybe 'Walt' *was* always more a girl than a boy.

Glancing over to his daughter, he noticed that Kathy was watching Christina eat like it was a romantic scene in a movie. Having missed the signs that Kathy had begun to fall for Christina before her transformation, George just shook his head and sat down.

"So..." he began, only to be interrupted by his wife.

"At least let the girl finish *eating*, George!" Linda mildly chided him.

Holding up his hands in mock surrender, the man sat back, folded his arms, and waited in obvious impatience.

Seeing him waiting, Christina picked up her pace. Even as hungry as she was, she almost didn't *want* to as the food tasted so good to her fresh senses. At last taking her final bite of fruit and finishing her glass of milk, she sat back and looked at the adults that sat across from her and Kathy.

"That was *delicious!* Thank you *so* much Mr. and Mrs. Grant!"

"It was *nothing!*" Linda downplayed the gift of feeding her. Looking over at George, she nodded.

Taking a breath, her husband looked over at the two children. "I want to start by saying that I'm not *entirely* convinced that you're *Walt*, Christina."

"But *Daddy...*" Kathy whined.

"Don't 'but Daddy' *me*, young lady!" he interrupted. "This whole nutty idea is *insane*, but... well... nothing else makes any *sense*, as nonsensical as *that* sounds, itself." Looking over at Christina, he shook his head. "All my life's experience is telling me that you're either *crazy* or the best midget con artist in the world, but you've managed one way or the other to convince both my daughter and her *mother* that it's true, and convincing *her* of anything she doesn't want to is a bigger miracle than a boy turning into a girl overnight!"

Nervous as to where this was all going, Christina fidgeted in her seat. "Mr. Grant? I *know* it's unbelievable! I hardly believe it and it happened to *me!* I really *was* the person you knew as Walt! I... I always wanted to be a girl, and now I *am* one! I just didn't have any idea how much it would mess up my *life*, and everyone *else's* at the same *time!* If I *could* take it back, I *would*, but I... I *can't*. Now I don't know what to *do.*"

"We have an idea." Linda interjected, getting a look from George that made her amend her statement. "Well, I have an idea, but it means a big *risk*, firstly to *you* Christina, and then, if things work out, to *us.*" Pausing a moment, she

explained her plan. "Mr. Grant works for the Bureau of Vital Records. He could create a record of birth for you and insert it into the system. If he gets caught *doing* it though, he could go to *prison*."

"Then we shouldn't do it." Christina sighed. "I can't let anyone else get hurt in this *mess* I made. I *won't* do it!"

Leaning back in his chair, George whistled low. "OK. I'm *convinced*. That's *Walt*! He always *was* honest to a fault and wouldn't *think* of doing anything that sneaky." Looking at her, he cleared his throat. "Sorry... *Christina*."

Smiling weakly, the girl in question shrugged. "It's OK Mr. Grant. I'm *used* to people calling me Walt. You've been doing it for over eight years! I don't mind, *really*! I mean, it's nice that people can look at me and know I'm a girl now, but it wasn't *your* fault you thought of me as a boy before! I *said* that I was because, *physically* anyway, I *was* one, even if I wanted to be like *this*." she gestured to herself.

"You've *always* been very *forgiving*, dear." Linda pointed out with a smirk and a glance at her husband, who held his hands up again.

"There's still the problem of getting you back with your family, Christina." he pointed out. "You're going to have to go home *eventually*."

Shaking her head, Christina was near to tears once more. "They... they won't *believe* me, Mr. Grant! I... I tried... *twice*! Once when I first woke up, then again after I ran away from the hospital. Mother hung up on me and it very nearly got me caught!"

"How *did* you hide from that officer?" Linda had to know.

"*I* did it." Kathy admitted. Seeing her parents turn to her, she shrank back slightly. "I... um... I *hid* her... in my *dresser*."

Astonished, the two looked over at Christina who just nodded. Looking at the girl, they both concluded that she *might* be small enough for it to work.

"Sweetie, don't you know she could have been *hurt* doing that?" Linda gently admonished her daughter.

"She was *fine* afterwards!" Kathy tried to defend herself. "I mean, other than the fact that she had to go to the *bathroom* and almost had an *accident*, but it was an *emergency*!"

Laughing quietly, George just shook his head. "Moving *on*... we *do* have a plan for getting you back to your family, Christina. We're going to take you to them and *support* you when you try to convince them you're their child. If it doesn't work though, if they won't *listen*, it'll mean that you'll be back in police custody and *we'll* have some very ticklish questions to answer. So long as we stick to the *truth*, that you convinced us all that you used to be *Walt*, we can't get in any legal trouble. Believing you isn't a *crime*."

Thinking a moment, Christina looked over at the two. "My parents had some men over at the house last night. I think they were FBI. I heard Mother call one of them Agent Stewart. I heard them telling Mother that they think *I'm* the key to finding who kidnapped Walt. They won't just give up *looking*, either for Walt *or* me... as weird as *that* is to say!"

George sat back. "That *complicates* things. If the *FBI* is investigating Walt's disappearance, then your parents probably told them all they knew about you. Most *importantly* that it's impossible that you're their *daughter*." Turning to Linda, he shrugged. "That blows *my* idea for fixing things."

"Not *necessarily*, love." Linda countered vaguely. "I mean, they would still *know*, right? Wouldn't that be *enough*?"

"For them, *sure*." he answered. "What about the *authorities*, though?"

"What *choice* do we have?" his wife pleaded. "She needs her *family*!"

Looking at the scared girl, he took a breath and let it out slowly. "Alright! You're *right*! She can't just hide out *here* forever, and the longer this goes on, the worse it's going to get. Christina? I want to call your parents and set up a meeting, then we'll all go over there and you can try to get your family back. Are you up to this? Like I said, if they don't believe us, they'll probably call those agents and turn you in and we wouldn't be able to *stop* them. We'd have to *let* them take you away. What do you say? It's *your* life."

Turning to Kathy, Christina took her hand and saw the fear in her friend's eyes. Thinking it over, she turned back to George. "OK, Mr. Grant. It seems like the only way to go. It's *honest*, so my heart is telling me that it's what I need to do *anyway*. Having *you* three there will help a *lot*."

Nodding curtly, the man got up and headed for the phone. Picking up the receiver, he dialed the number that he'd memorized years ago due to the girls' friendship. Hearing the line ring, he hoped he had picked his words well.

Ruth Cocoran sat at her dining room table staring at her smartphone. Dark circles surrounded her eyes and her complexion had turned ashen, sallow, and drawn. She hadn't eaten anything more than toast or drunk anything more than a few cups of coffee in the last day. She'd only slept a few fitful hours, haunted by dreams of finding Walt and their happy reunion, only for it to be spoiled by waking back into her living nightmare.

Her husband David sat across from her, looking not much better. His large frame seemed to sag under a weight he couldn't carry, his shoulders hunched over and his normally happy eyes darkened with worry. His finger flipped through pictures the FBI had sent them of known pedophiles in the area in an effort to see if the distraught man or his wife might recognize one of them as having been in the area. The sheer number of them just made the two fear that even if they got their child back she might've had to endure a horrifying ordeal... and there was nothing they could *do* about it.

The two were also barely speaking to one another. After the two FBI agents had left the night before, they'd argued. Ruth wanted him to go out putting up Missing posters around the neighborhood, but David refused as they'd been advised to just stay at home in case 'Walt' came home or the kidnappers contacted them. David ended up sleeping on the couch that night, his dreams similar to those of his wife. This new task didn't improve their mood.

As soon as Ruth's cell phone began to ring, the two looked up at each other. Neither one had to say anything. They both were thinking the same thing; that it was someone calling to say they'd found their child's body.

Swallowing hard, Ruth looked down and sighed in relief. "It's *Kathy*." she sighed. "They probably want to check on us."

"Make it short." David said more snippishly than he'd intended. Turning his tone softer, he sighed. "I mean, they said to keep the lines free... just in case."

Glaring at him briefly, Ruth's expression lightened. "Alright." Tapping the icon, she put the phone up to her ear. "Hello?"

"Ruth? It's *George*."

"George? I know you're probably wanting to *help* in some way, but we're holding up OK and we need to keep the phone free, so..."

"Ruth!" he snapped. "I'm sorry, but this is *important!* We... we have some information that will *help*, but we need to talk to you *alone*... just you two and *us*. Would it be OK to come over there?"

Confused, Ruth was desperate. "O... OK, George. We'll be expecting you."

"We'll be there in ten minutes, Ruth. Just... just hang *in* there, *OK?* Bye."

"Bye." she answered vacantly. Closing the call, she looked up at David.
"They said they have some information for us."

"I'll call Agent Stewart!" he stated eagerly.

"No!" she shouted weakly. "He... he said it had to be just *us*... no one *else*."

Furrowing his brow, David shook his head. "That doesn't sound *right*! We should *call*, Ruth! He might be *in* on it! We need *help*!"

"Don't you even *think* about jeopardizing this chance, David!" she barked.
"You call *anyone* and we're *through*! Do you *understand* me?"

Bristling at her threat, he very nearly called the agent just out of spite, but his need to try and restore his family overrode his ego and he put his phone down. "Alright, Ruth. You win. We'll do it *your* way."

Calming down, Ruth only didn't cry because she had no more tears left to shed. She'd cried so many times in the last twenty-four hours that she was emotionally drained. The only clue they had to their child's disappearance was the crazy girl who tried to make them think she was 'Walt', and *she* was missing as well, having escaped police custody. Ruth was so desperate for information, she'd gladly take a call from kidnappers and entertain them as honored guests, if necessary.

The drive over to the Cocoran home was done in total silence. The whole way, Kathy wouldn't let go of Christina's hand; the worry and fear obvious in her expression. Pulling in front of their house, Christina looked out the car window at the familiar edifice and gulped. *Well, here goes!* Walking up to her door, it felt odd to knock instead of just walk on in.

Ruth was already at the door, having watched the car pull up. David stood behind her ready to pummel the man if he knew where his child was and wouldn't tell them. When Ruth opened the door, she looked down to see

Christina standing and holding hands with Kathy, her child's best friend; her parents standing behind the both of them.

Seeing the crazy girl with her child's best friend made Ruth suspicious. She was not at all convinced that this wasn't some elaborate hoax that her 'son' and the Grants were playing. Still, even if it was, the only way to get it to stop seemed to be to play along. "Won't you come in?" she asked politely.

Christina could feel the coldness in the room. Her mother had no feelings for her other than polite tolerance. "Thank you, Mo... um... *thanks*."

Leading the four over to the dining room table, the five sat together a short time in silence, none of them sure what to say, with David standing behind Ruth with anger visible on his face. Finally, Christina spoke up.

"I guess you want to know what this is all about. I know you don't *believe* me, but... um... I used to be *Walt*."

"Go on." she answered bitterly. "I *assume* there's more?"

"You don't *believe* me, *do* you, Mother?" Christina sighed.

Standing up, Ruth turned to look away from the girl. "How *can* I?"

"I've never lied to you in my whole *life*, Mother. Why would I start *now*?"

"*Walt* never lied!" she pointed out. "I don't know who *you* are!"

"I'm *still* telling you the truth." Christina insisted. "I'm *here* because I need you to *believe* me! Otherwise, I wouldn't risk getting caught to *be* here!"

Turning to look at the girl, she was near to hysterics again. "Look, obviously you've been *coached* by Walt to know things that only *he* would know! Why are you *doing* this?"

"Mrs. Cocoran?" Kathy interrupted. "She really *is* Walt! I *know* it's her! I... I can *tell*."

"You're all *in* on this!" Ruth snapped.

Linda tried to calm things down. "Ruth! *Please!* Just... just *listen* to her!" Looking over at her husband, seeing him nod, she turned back to face the woman once more. "We *believe* her."

Christina tried once again. "Kathy and them had nothing to *do* with all this, Mother! She's here 'cause I *needed* her to be here! She's been my best friend for eight *years!* How can you think that I'd put you and Daddy through all this on *purpose?* Haven't I always been *good?*"

Hearing the girl speak, it was hard for Ruth to deny that she sounded so much like her child. When she turned and looked at her though, nothing of Walt showed. "My *Walt* has always been good! Where *is* he?"

"I'm right *here*, Mother!" Christina sobbed. "What can I do to show you I'm *Walt?* I'll do anything you *want!*"

A pang of guilt washed over Ruth as she watched the girl reduced to tears at her harsh words. Thinking for a moment, she had an idea. "OK, if you're Walt, you'll have your birth mark on the bottom of your foot."

Shaking her head sadly, Christina sighed. "It's *gone*. I *looked*."

Throwing her hands up in hopelessness, Ruth turned away from the four. "Well, I don't know what to *tell* you then! You're not *Walt!*"

"No she's *not*." Kathy stated plainly. "She's *Christina*. Walt was just someone she *pretended* to be." Seeing the look on her friend's face, Kathy shrugged. "Well? It's *true*, isn't it?"

With a nod, Christina blinked at her. "Yeah, it's *true*." Turning back to Ruth, she tried once more. "Mother? Ask me *anything*. If you think Walt *coached* me, he couldn't have taught me *everything* about him, right? But, if I really *am* Walt like I'm *saying*, there can't be *anything* you could ask that I shouldn't know. *Right?*"

Thinking a moment, Ruth nodded. "OK. What's Walt's favorite color?"

With a smirk, Christina shook her head. "I say it's *green*, but *you* know it's actually purple and gold... the colors I picked for my birthday last year."

Pursing her lips, Ruth tried a different tactic. "OK, what was it your grandma Edith said to you the last time you talked to her?"

Christina giggled lightly. "*Great-aunt* Edith was Grandma Virginia's *sister*, and she never said *anything* to me 'cuz she died a week before I was *born!*"

"What did you do that last night before you went to bed?" Ruth probed.

Swallowing hard, Christina looked away as she answered, bolstered only by Kathy taking her hand. "We... we watched *Angels in the Outfield* again, even though it was your turn to pick, then afterwards I kissed Daddy on the cheek and said goodnight, then kissed you and said goodnight before you asked if I wanted you to tuck me in. I... I said no, that I was a big *boy*, but I almost slipped and said big *girl*. Then I went to bed after saying my prayers."

Looking at the girl that appeared and sounded nothing like her child but at the same time talked so much like him, Ruth shook her head. "Alright. If you're Walt, why did you lie to your father and I about wanting to be a girl?"

Christina shrugged. "It... it was *pointless*, Mother. I didn't look anything *like* a girl. Even *trying* would just make it feel *worse*, reminding me every day that I could never be *pretty*... like *you*."

"Not every girl is *pretty*." Ruth pointed out. "Why would it *matter* if being a girl is all you really wanted?"

"Because trying to be a girl would have just been a big *joke*. I was gonna look like *Daddy* when I grew up! *No one* would believe *he* could be a girl!"

"You might have at *least* told us the truth, even if you felt it was pointless trying to *live* like a girl." Ruth grumbled. She could hardly believe it, but the more she talked to this girl, the more it seemed that she really was her child. *I must be crazy!* she mused.

Listening to the exchange, David shook his head. "This is *nuts!*" Turning to George, his face clouded over. "Where's my *son*? You have this *Christina* girl with you, and you're trying to peddle the same story *she* is, so you're *involved!* I want to know where Walt is right *now* or I'm calling the *cops!*"

Shrugging passively, George looked back at him calmly. "Do that and you'll lose your child *forever*, Dave. They'll take her *away* from you."

"Oh *stop* it already!" he shouted back. "*That* is not my *son*, George!"

"You're *right*." Linda admitted. "She's your *daughter*, David! *Yes!* It sounds totally *crazy!* I didn't believe it *either* until she *proved* it to me half a dozen different ways!" Turning to Ruth, her eyes softened. "Ruth? You *know* me! Our kids have been best friends for most of a *decade*. Am I some *crackpot* that falls for every sob story or line of bull? Would I *believe* her if she hadn't *proved* it to me? My *God*, Ruth! The girl was too embarrassed to look at her body to take a *bath* because she'd never seen herself naked as a *girl* before!"

"Mrs. Cocoran?" Kathy chimed in. "I... I have something to tell you. I... um... I've sorta been *falling* for Walt for a while now. I... I think I *love* her."

"My Walt is a *boy*, Kathy!" she snapped.

"Not *really!*" Kathy retorted. "I mean, when was the last time you saw her *act* like a boy? Have you *ever?* I mean *really?* She *told* me about the times you sent her to that *therapist!* She *knew* you were worried about her being too *girly*, but she couldn't *help* it! She was a *girl* inside... and... and... and it was *her* that I was falling in *love* with!"

Facing her own doubts, Ruth looked at Christina. "Yes. We *were* worried that Walt was acting too... *effeminate.*"

Stepping forward, David scowled. "Walt *told* us, over and *over* again, that he was a *boy.*"

Shaking her head, Christina sighed. "Daddy? I already *explained* that to you. I could *never* be a girl before! It was pointless to even *try!* So I told you I was a boy because *technically* I *was*... at least my *body* was. But Kathy's *right.* Did I ever *act* like a boy? Even *once?* Even a *little?*"

The wind taken out of his sails, David looked away. "No. Walt never *did.*"

Seeing them at least willing to listen now, Linda presented her husband's solution. "George figured out a foolproof way to *prove* to you both that Christina is your daughter, if you're ready to *hear* that truth."

Looking at the woman in surprise, Ruth stepped closer. "*How?*"

"Have her genetically tested against you two for paternity and maternity." Linda answered. Turning to see the surprised look on Christina's face, she smiled. "You told us that your angel made you to look like a mix of your *parents*, right? That means that you should be a genetic *match* to them, like the way you were when you were *Walt.*"

Thinking about it for a moment, Christina just nodded with a smile.

Chapter 8 - Inevitable Complications

"*Wait* a minute." David interjected with a puzzled look. "You propose we have this girl's DNA tested to see if she's our *daughter* to prove that she's actually Walt turned into a girl by an *angel*?"

"Exactly." George shrugged. "*Think* about it. If by some miracle your son *was* transformed into your daughter, she should still have your *DNA*, right? Alright, not the same DNA that *Walt* had, but even *angels* have to obey the rules of *biochemistry*! She had to give Christina *someone's* DNA! Why not her own *parents*?"

"You have nothing to *lose* and everything to *gain* by it!" Linda pointed out.

"Mother? Daddy?" Christina pleaded. "*Please*? If it doesn't work, I'll turn *myself* in to the FBI. I really won't have anywhere else to *go* if this doesn't work." Seeing their look of surprise at knowing they were talking to the FBI, she sighed sadly. "I... I was outside in the bushes last night when they left. I know they're looking for me because they think I know how to lead them to... um... well... *me*."

Ruth turned to look at David, hope in her eyes for the first time since her child disappeared. "What do you think, David?"

Pursing his lips, David tried to figure out if there was some way this could be a trick, but came up blank. "OK. It seems to be a fair test, if she's *willing*." Looking at the girl claiming to be his daughter, he sighed. "It's better than doing *nothing*."

"There's a *downside*." George pointed out. Seeing them turn with looks of concern, he laid it out plainly. "If it proves she's your daughter, you'll have some explaining to do to the authorities. Christina said you told them she *wasn't*. I don't know what can be done about that. Claim temporary insanity over Walt's disappearance? The DNA evidence will be *irrefutable*, though."

Suddenly, an idea sprang into Kathy's mind. "Hey! *I* know what they can do! Say that Christina is Walt's *twin* and that she's been away... um... with her *grandparents*, maybe? The ones that live in Boston?"

Thinking it over, David sighed. "That's no good. Even if the test *proves* she's our daughter, there's no explanation why she doesn't have a birth record. Or a school record... or why nobody has ever *heard* of her before."

Ruth looked at the defeated expression on Christina's face and recognized it. *That's Walt's disappointed face!* Stepping up to the girl, she sank down to her knees and turned Christina to face her, the woman's eyes wide and searching. "*Walt?* Is that *really* you? Is this what you *really* wanted?"

Smiling weakly, Christina nodded. "For as long as I can *remember*, Mother! I... I wish I could take it *back*, though! I never wanted to *hurt* anyone, and I ended up hurting *everyone!* Even *myself!* I'm *sorry!* I wish you could have the boy you *want* back!" Tears were spilling down her cheeks as she finished.

Embracing the girl, Ruth felt the weight of the last day evaporate in a flash. "Oh, *Walter!* It really *is* you, *isn't* it?" Tears once more shed from her eyes, this time in joy. "Oh, *baby!* I just want *you* back! I don't *care* what you *look* like! Boy or girl, I just couldn't *stand* not having *you!*"

Coming up behind Ruth, David took a knee and looked at the child holding his wife. Seeing the way the girl cried into her shoulder sent his memory back several years to a day Christina had come home from school. Some of the boys had been picking on her for not being tough because she wouldn't fight, even though she was already bigger than all the other second graders and many of the older boys. It was the next day that he'd started teaching her self-defense. For the first time, he saw 'Walt' in the girl, but he needed more than just his gut feeling. *The tests will prove it, one way or another.*

Going to his phone, David did a few searches while Ruth and Christina just held each other. Seeing what he was looking for, he grimaced. "*Problem.*"

Letting go of her child, Ruth looked up at him. "What *is* it, David?"

"It says here that for a DNA test to be legally recognized, you have to give proof of the child's identity at time of testing... a photo ID, birth certificate, or Social Security card. Otherwise the results can be disputed."

Scoffing, Ruth looked at Christina happily. "I don't *need* the test, David! She's my *baby!* I *know* it!"

"Actually, you *do* need the tests." George pointed out. "The whole idea is to use the test results to *get* her a birth record. See, in order for Christina to get a birth certificate, which you need for things like school, you'll need to apply to the Office of Vital Records for one... and be *rejected.*"

"Rejected?" Ruth puzzled. "Why apply to get *rejected?*"

"Because then you can file with the courts to have Vital Records issue her a *delayed* birth certificate." George explained. "Until they reject the request, the court won't accept a petition to do so. Once they reject the request, you can file for a court order, using the DNA evidence to prove that she's your daughter, and *then* Vital Records *has* to issue one."

"Isn't that a little... *crazy?*" Ruth asked.

"Crazier than Christina changing into a *girl* overnight?" he retorted.

"Good point." she admitted.

"Anyway, what Dave found throws a wrinkle in it. No DNA test, no proof, no birth certificate, no school, no jobs later, and so on. The downside is that if you *do* get the test done, you might get hit with not putting her in school

or not having an affidavit of intent to home-school on file. This isn't going to be *easy*."

Looking worried, Ruth sat in the chair next to her daughter. "It's starting to sound like it would be easier to get her a fake ID."

George shrugged. "Not my *call*. All I can tell you is what I know. I'm not a *lawyer*. I just work for Vital Records as a Database Administrator." Seeing the look in the woman's eyes, George shook his head. "*No*. Linda already *asked* me to fake a birth certificate for Christina. I could go to *prison* if I got caught. I won't do that to my family. It wouldn't matter if I were *willing* to, though. *Christina* already said no to it."

Looking to his daughter, David nodded. "That sounds like Walt."

"*Christina*." Kathy corrected him, looking at the faint smile on the girl's face for backing up her change of name.

"Sounds like you're starting to *believe*." George smiled at him. "Don't feel *too* bad. It took *me* a while too, and I had *these* two working on me!" he quipped, pointing a thumb at his wife and daughter.

Shaking his head, David looked down at Christina who just looked up at him plaintively. "Let's just say I'm willing to be *objective* about the idea." he smiled down at her. "We'll *see*." Looking back at his phone, he noticed an option he hadn't considered. "Huh. Well, it won't help with the *legal* issues, but it'll sure settle the question as far as *I'm* concerned."

"What's *that*, David?" Ruth asked curiously.

"This place has a home DNA test kit. You swab the cheek of each person you want to test for parentage, send it in, and get an answer in five days." Tapping a few times, David sighed. "Well, it's an *option*, at least."

Looking to her mother, Christina asked, "What do I do until *then*?"

"You stay with *us*." Ruth smiled. "I don't *need* the test. I can *feel* it's you!"

"It may be the better way to start." George pointed out. "You can say that Christina came back and agreed to a DNA test to *prove* she's your daughter, then claim that you found out she *is* your daughter, as impossible as that seems." Pausing, he looked over at Ruth. "Who *delivered* Christina?"

"Doctor Young." she shrugged. "*Ironic*, since he was sixty-five at the time!"

"Is he still alive, do you know?" George continued his line of questioning.

"I heard he had a heart attack shortly after Walt... I mean... *Christina*... was born." Ruth answered, looking at her daughter with a pained expression.

"Well, you could always claim that Christina was Walt's fraternal twin that you were told was stillborn. Then it's all on a dead doctor. Could still get sticky with no Fetal Death Certificate, though. You'd have to blame that on him, too. Say that he told you he'd take care of it." Turning to Christina, he gave her a serious look. "This would mean you'd have to *lie*, sweetie. The authorities would be sure to ask you where you've *been* all this time... who *raised* you... where you went to *school*... and you'd have to say that you can't remember and *stick* to that story."

"What about the fact that she's been claiming to be *Walt*?" David wondered as he sat at the table. "I mean, that's *bound* to raise some eyebrows."

Considering the question, they all sat silently a moment until Christina spoke. "I was *always* called Walt, even though I'm a girl. The people that raised me were nice, but treated me like a boy. I found out my parents were Ruth and David Cocoran and was brought here. I don't know where I was before waking up in Walt's bed. I've never been to school. I don't know anything else." Christina stated to the surprise of everyone.

Seeing them all staring at her in shock, she shrugged. "Well? It's not a *lie!* I *was* called Walt, I *am* a girl, you two *were* always nice, I *was* treated like a boy, I *must've* figured out you were my parents at *some* point in time, *Lisbeth* brought my new body here, and I have *no idea* where it was before *that*. I *don't* know anything before waking up in my old bed and I've *never* been to school before because I'm *Christina* now and Christina didn't *exist* before yesterday... not this *body*, anyway. It's just like when you used to ask me if I was a girl and I could truthfully say *no...* because *technically* I *wasn't*. See? *Not* a lie!"

Her parents stared at their daughter in amazement while she made it sound like she was raised by people who'd abducted her, using nothing but the truth.

"You're gonna be a *lawyer* when you grow up!" David stated with a smile. "Just promise me you'll use your insidious powers for *good* and not *evil!*"

Making the five others seated around the table laugh, Christina blushed and looked away shyly. "Is... is it *wrong* to say that?"

His laughter diminishing, George shook his head. "There is no real *wrong* here in dealing with this situation the best and only honest way you *can*. If *anything*, you saying all that, and sticking *to* it, means you *might* be able to pull this off while being totally *honest* about it... all without getting locked up in the nearest *psychiatric* ward!"

Stepping outside a moment, needing a break from the heady conversation, David looked up at the sky. *Is all this possible?* he wondered. *I mean, if my son was always a girl inside, and an angel of God turned his body into a girl, then that means God wanted him to be a girl... so why not just give us a girl? Why put us through all this?* Dismissing the thought, he resolved to wait until they could get proof before tackling the bigger questions. With a deep breath, he turned and headed back inside.

"George!" Ruth shouted. "We can't do it until we get the test results back! They'll take her *away*! I just got her *back*!"

"Ruth!" he snapped. "You *have* to! If you don't, it'll look *suspicious*!"

"I don't *care*!" she retorted. "I won't lose her *again*!"

"Woah!" David interceded. "What's all *this* about?" Looking around quickly, he noticed the children weren't anywhere in sight. "Where are the kids?"

"In Christina's room." Linda explained. "George was just explaining that you two are going to have to call the FBI soon, *today* in fact, and tell them that Christina's here or else it'll look suspicious. Ruth doesn't want to."

"I won't *do* it, David!" she growled. "I won't lose her *again*! Not this *soon*!"

Trying to calm her down, David put his hands on her shoulders, only for her to shrug them off. Backing away, he sighed. "They're *right*, honey. You *know* they are. We need to call Agent Stewart right away or else we might get in even more trouble than we probably already *will*!"

"*No*, David!" Linda insisted. "They'll take her *away*!"

"Not *forever*!" he pointed out. "At least you'll know where she is and that she's *safe*! Can't that be *enough* for now, honey?"

Fuming, Ruth crossed her arms. "But *why*? Why do we have to tell them *now*? Why can't we wait until next week when we get the test results that *proves* she's my daughter?"

"What do we tell them when we *do* call them?" David queried. "If we tell them next week that she came here today and we did the test, what do we tell them when they ask why we didn't call as soon as she got here?"

"We can tell them we were waiting for the test results!" she insisted.

"That doesn't explain why we didn't contact them about their lead witness in *Walt's* disappearance!" her husband stated.

"Walt's not *missing*!" Ruth countered. "She's in her *room*!"

"You're forgetting that to the *rest* of the world, Christina isn't *Walt*, Ruth." Linda reminded her. "She needs to be Walt's fraternal twin as far as anyone else is concerned. That still leaves Walt *missing*. They'd want to know why you didn't report seeing *Christina*."

Shaking her head, trying to clear it, Ruth couldn't think straight. "I... I *know* that we have to pretend all this, but..." Turning to face Linda, she approached her. "If *Kathy* had been missing for over a day, and *you* got her back, could *you* let her go again so soon?"

Thinking about it, Linda shook her head. "No, I guess I *couldn't*." Searching for a solution, she brightened after a moment. "I have an idea!"

Agent Lyle Stewart climbed out of the car and groaned. He'd spent the last several hours trying to make something out of the samples the hospital had taken when Christina had been in custody. The photos and video had failed to match with any reported missing juvenile in the NCIC.

On a hunch, he'd had the evidence reviewed and had finally turned something useful. While Agent Richard Kent, his partner, was interviewing witnesses from the hospital, he got the call from David Cocoran and left for their home. Knocking on the door, he didn't have to wait long.

David opened the door and waved the FBI agent in. "Come in! We have some information about Christina!"

Looking around the room, nothing much seemed different, though when he saw Ruth Cocoran, he noticed she was not nearly as distraught as before. "Good. So do *I*."

Handing the FBI agent a letter, the agent began reading it but didn't get far before Ruth came up to him.

"Christina might actually be our *daughter*, Agent Stewart." she admitted.

Pursing his lips, he nodded. "I *know*."

Her face turning quizzical, she was at a loss. "*What?* How did *you* know?"

Sitting on their couch, he waited for the two parents to likewise sit down. "I was hitting a dead end on the evidence we got from the hospital, so I had it compared to everyone involved. One of our sketch artists noticed that she shared a remarkable resemblance to both you and your husband. So I had her do an age advancement on Christina. It turns out she'll probably look a lot like you do *now* in about thirty years, Mrs. Cocoran."

David breathed out heavily. "So then... what the note says may be *true*."

Skimming the childish handwriting quickly, Lyle nodded. "It would fit the facts, and explain a lot of things... her insistence that she was both your daughter... and named *Walt*, to start with. Did you do what the letter said?"

Shaking her head, Ruth looked at David. "We were thinking about getting one of those home DNA kits, but it takes *days* to get the results."

"We could pay extra to get a rush job." David noted. "We should know by *Friday* if we do it *today*."

"You'd be wasting your *money*, Mr. Cocoran." Lyle half-smiled. "Good thing you called me right *away*! Once I suspected that Christina was related to you,

I had her DNA sample that the hospital took compared to the ones that you two supplied to me yesterday." Pausing, he looked at the two. "She *is* your daughter. No *doubt*."

Breathing a sigh of relief, Ruth turned to her husband who looked stunned. "I... I *knew*. I didn't *need* the proof, I just *knew*."

"Are you *certain*?" David asked. "I mean, how is that *possible*?"

"I have a *theory*," the agent opined. "It's a little *out* there, but it's the only thing that fits all the facts." Holding up the letter, he took a plastic bag out of his pocket and slid it inside. "It goes along with what the letter says, too. Walt had a fraternal twin *sister*. The only problem with that is that you've never *mentioned* it, and there's no record of her *anywhere* in *any* system."

"I... I had a *daughter* when Walt was born, Agent Stewart." Ruth answered honestly as Christina had asked her to do. "She didn't get a chance to *live*. At least, that's what we were *told*."

"*Really*?" he asked skeptically. "There's no record of that *either*. I *looked*. I also looked up your *doctor*. He died shortly after Walt and Christina were born, but there was something unusual about his estate. Probate court records show that ten thousand dollars in small bills was found in a safe in his home after his death. Could be he just kept it as emergency cash, some people *do*, but there were no large withdrawals to *match* it. It was never *explained*."

Seeing their shock, he nodded and smiled. "I suspect that your daughter was *abducted* by your doctor and then sold on the black market. Then he goes and *dies* before he gets them their faked birth certificate. Because the people who bought your daughter didn't have any documentation, they likely either got her a fake ID or they just never enrolled her in school. Doctor Young didn't file her death record because there was no *body* and the fact was quietly *lost*. It *happens*."

"So *now* what?" David inquired carefully. "What does this have to do with... um... *Walt's* disappearance?"

"I further suspect that your son was abducted by the *same people*, and that Christina was left behind as some sort of sick 'exchange' because they wanted a *boy* and not a *girl*, which explains why this Christina says she was called *Walt*. When we *find* her, we might be able to get enough information from her to track them down and get your *son* back!"

Clearing her throat, Ruth nervously asked, "What happens with *Christina*, though? I mean, we do *get* her, don't we? She's my *baby*, Agent Stewart! I can't lose her *again*!"

Furrowing his brow, he shook his head. "Well, she'll be in FBI custody while we question her. After *that*, well... the issue is that you have no *legal* proof she's your daughter... other than our DNA test. You'd need to go to court to obtain custody. She'll be remanded to Arizona DCS in the mean time."

"But *why*?" Ruth cried. "She's my *daughter*! You said so *yourself*!"

Thinking a moment, Lyle smiled again. "You *could* petition DCS to place her in your custody while waiting for your court date. The DNA evidence we'll give them and your stable home life should work to your advantage, but in the end it's *their* call... not *mine*." he explained. "Now, about this *letter*. I'll have it analyzed to see if we can get a clue as to where she is. The sooner we find *her*, the sooner we find *Walt*!"

"Thank you, Agent Stewart." David sighed. "What do we do *now*?"

"Do you have some vacation time saved up?" he asked. "Now might be a good time to *take* it. You'll need to stay *available*."

"I think I'll start looking for a good lawyer." David mused out loud. "It seems once Christina's found, we're going to want to get the wheels rolling right

away. I don't want my daughter trapped in some foster home for a few *years* the way I've heard *some* kids end up. She's already spent *enough* time living a lie." At that he glanced over at Ruth who looked away ashamedly.

Getting up, Lyle shook David's hand. "I think things are starting to gel here, Mr. Cocoran! Call *immediately* if you have any contact with Christina! Walt's life may *depend* on it!"

Heading back to his field office, Lyle showed the letter to his partner before he turned it over to the Questioned Documents division.

"What do you think, Rich?" he asked. "It *fits*."

Nodding, his partner sighed. "Obviously a child's handwriting, either that or an uneducated adult. Let's see... '*Dear Mom and Dad, This is Christina, the girl that woke up in your son's bed. I was raised by two people who called me Walt growing up and treated me like a boy. They were never mean. I learned that you are my parents. I was brought to your house and Walt was taken away. I know you can use DNA to prove that I am your daughter. I got a Q-tip and put it in my cheek and taped it to the bottom of the paper.*' Hmm! Smart kid!" he offered, noticing the swab at the bottom.

Reading the paper through the plastic was difficult, but he pressed forward. "Where was I? Oh! '*I have never been to school and don't know where I was before I was brought to you. No one ever told me. I knew I was really a girl, so I called myself Christina. I hope you will too. I am sorry Walt was taken away from you, but I want to be your daughter. I only ran away because I was scared. Signed, Christina Joy Cocoran*' Wow! That's pretty *heavy*, Lyle! Poor kid!"

"Yeah." Lyle agreed. "Seem a little *convenient*? I mean, here we have this *bizarre* child abduction where another kid gets left in their place, with apparently no motive, and now *this* letter ties it all up nice and neat. DNA *proves* she's their daughter, then the deal with their *doctor*. Doesn't it all just

seem a little... I don't know... *easy*? I don't *like* it, Rich! I think the parents are in this up to their eyeballs!"

"So *prove* it!" Richard answered back. "How? *Why*? Where'd their *kid* go? Where'd this *girl* come from? Why doesn't she have any paper trail? How is it no one's ever even *heard* of this Christina before yesterday? You wanna hear what *I* dug up while you were getting the smoking *gun* here? *I* got to listen to some nurse tell me a story about an *angel* that grants *wishes*! She had a *totally* different idea of where Walt went and where Christina came from! Get *this*! According to *her*, they're the same *person*! Claims Christina told her that an angel turned him into a girl, and she *believes* it! Wanna go with *that* theory or stick with the *rational*?" He held up the letter for emphasis.

Sighing, Lyle shook his head. "*Fine*! We'll go with this until we have some reason *not* to! I'm *telling* you though, Rich! My *gut* is telling me that these people *know* something about where their kid went that they aren't *telling* us! I don't know! Maybe they *sold* their daughter to Doctor Young and the ten grand was his cut. I'll dig into the family's financials. In the mean time, get that letter down to Q.D.! We need to know *everything* about it!"

Chapter 9 - True Lies

Waiting for word from her parents, Christina sat with Kathy in her room at the Grants'. When Linda suggested she write the letter, she insisted that she not lie, even insisting on taping the Q-tip she swabbed inside her cheek to the paper herself. Leaving to return to the Grant home, she and Kathy spent the time watching videos online. Hearing the phone ring though, she jumped up and practically ran out into the living room.

"Is it Mother and Daddy?" she asked anxiously. Seeing Linda nod with a smile, she relaxed. "*Finally!* I thought they'd *never* call!"

Linda listened carefully, her smile dimming as she glanced over at Christina occasionally. "OK. Well, we *knew* that might happen. Well, she's standing right *here*, waiting to find out. OK. We'll see you *soon*, then. Bye." Hanging up, she turned to the girl who had so complicated all their lives.

"Is something *wrong*, Mrs. Grant?" she inquired meekly.

"Nothing we weren't *expecting*, Christina." Linda smiled. "You'll get *through* it! Just be patient and have faith that it'll work out in the end! I'm going to take you back to your house. You should get ready."

Feeling Kathy take her hand, she gripped it tightly, afraid of what lay ahead of her. Turning to her best friend, she smiled weakly. "So long as I have you, Mother, Daddy, and your parents, I think I can get through *anything!*"

Taking Christina into a warm hug, Kathy felt like she was saying goodbye forever, but managed to keep back the tears. Gripping her tightly, she didn't want to let go, but eventually released the girl. "I... I was looking forward to you spending the night again! You haven't done that since we were *eight!*" Lowering her voice, she confided in a whisper, "That's when I started to like you as more than a *friend*... that last time you slept over!"

Smiling happily, Christina gave her one last hug before backing away. Back in the very same clothes she'd taken from the donation bin after they'd been laundered, she turned to Kathy's mother. "I... I'm ready, Mrs. Grant."

After dropping her off, Linda waited long enough to see Christina go in the front door just after sunset before driving back home. Unsure and fearing for the girl, she tried to just focus on helping her daughter get through these next few days once she found out what was going to happen. *This will be hard for Kathy.* she sighed. *I hope she can take it.*

Sitting on her parents' couch, Christina nodded absently. "I... I understand. I'm glad Agent Stewart was able to let you know I really am your daughter, so *that's* good!" Swallowing hard, she looked up at her mother and father who sat on either side of her after calling the FBI. "Will... will I be away from you two *long*?"

Ruth sniffed back a tear. "We... we don't *know*, sweetie." she admitted. "If there was *any* other way to do this, I'd take it in a *heartbeat*!"

David wrapped an arm around her and squeezed. "It'll be *fine*, sport! Um... I guess that doesn't work very well anymore." Guilt washing over him, he looked away. "I... I guess it never *did*."

"It's *OK*, Daddy!" she smiled, hugging him back. "I don't think *football* is gonna work *out*, though!" she giggled, happy to see it brought a smile to his face.

Unable to hold back her fears, Ruth began to cry. "I... I'm *sorry*, baby! I'm just so *scared* for you! You... you might end up in a *foster* home, and getting you back from there isn't *easy* and will take *time*. Time that we'll never get *back*! I won't be able to *protect* you there!"

Taking a turn to hug her mother, Christina tried to cheer her up as well. "It'll be OK, Mother! Daddy taught me how to defend myself! I bet it's *nothing*

like you see in movies or on TV! I bet whoever they are, they just want to *help* kids like me that need a temporary place to stay! It's better than living on the *streets*, right?"

Hearing the car pull up in front of their house, Ruth stood up in a near panic. Wringing her hands, she sat back down quickly and hugged her daughter. "I love you Christina! *Always* know that!"

Returning the affection, Christina nodded and hugged her as fiercely as she could. "I love you *too*, Mother! You're the best mom I could ever *hope* for!" Turning to her father, she hugged him as well. "You *too*, Daddy!"

"Love you... *beautiful!*" David managed to get out before the knock came, making him break the embrace and get up to answer the door.

Returning to her mother's arms, she watched as David opened the door and let the two men in. Seeing the first man's eyes meet hers, Christina felt a shiver go down her spine. Fear gripping her throat, she didn't think she could speak then, even if she wanted to.

"Come in, Agent Stewart, Agent Kent." David stated politely. Gesturing to the couch, he led the two men over. "This is... um... I guess our *daughter*, Christina. Christina? This is Agent Kent and Agent Stewart. They're with the FBI and looking for Walt."

Lyle took a knee in front of the girl and smiled. "*Hi* there, Christina! We've been looking all *over* for you, sweetie!" Seeing the way she gripped Ruth in fear, and the way the woman held her in return, he felt certain that there was more going on than there seemed to be. *I'll be damned if I can figure out what it is though!* Clearing his throat, Lyle tried to calm her. "What's your favorite ice cream, Christina?"

Gulping, the girl tried to relax. "S... strawberry." she eked out.

"I *thought* so!" he almost laughed. "My daughter *loved* strawberry when she was your age! She's all grown *up* now, though! She's in college studying law. She wants to be a lawyer. What do *you* want to be when *you* grow up?"

Biting her lower lip, Christina shrugged. "I dunno. Maybe a *teacher*?"

"A *teacher*!" he said happily. "Do you *know* any teachers?"

Looking up at her mother, Christina slowly looked back to him. "I... I've never been to school, Agent Stewart. Teachers help kids learn. I'd *like* that."

Watching her for signs of deception, he saw none and backed off, standing back up slowly. "Do you know what the FBI is, Christina?"

"You're like the *police*... like Officer *Martinez*." she answered, her hard tone betraying her negative feelings. "He's the policeman that took me away from my *mother* when I was brought here to her. Are... are you gonna take me away from her, *too*?"

Looking up at Ruth and seeing her barely restrained anger, he shifted his gaze back to her daughter. "Do you know you have a *brother*, Christina?"

"I... I know that my Mother and Daddy raised a boy named Walt. *I* was called Walt. The people that raised me treated me like a boy."

"Did that make you sad?" Lyle probed delicately.

Shrugging, Christina looked away. "*Sorta*. Mostly I just tried to make them happy. I knew I was really a *girl*, though. I... I tried not to let the pain tear me down, even when it was intolerable." Looking up at Ruth again, she saw her start to tear up and look away. "Don't be *sad*, Mother!"

Grabbing a tissue from the box on the end table next to her, Ruth dabbed her eyes. "I... I can't *help* it, sweetheart! I feel like I failed you as a *mother*!"

You were *hurting* and I couldn't *help* you! I... I didn't *know*! If I *did*, I could have *done* something about it!"

Trying to get back on track, Lyle changed the subject again. "Christina? Your brother was taken away by the people that raised you and we want to get him back to his mother and daddy. What were the names of the people that raised you?"

Looking at her parents, Christina sighed and looked at the floor. "I only ever called them Mother and Daddy."

"Did you ever hear them call each *other* by a name?" he pressed her.

Now caught, Christina couldn't answer his question without lying, so instead she just shut down and stared at the floor.

Frustrated, Lyle turned to David. "She's obviously repressing something... holding it in because of some trauma. The hospital cleared her of *most* abuse, but she'll need a full set of X-rays and a pelvic exam to know for *sure*."

Hearing that, Christina looked up with fire in her eyes. "*Nobody* is going to touch me down *there*! *Nobody*! I'll sock *you* just like Doctor *Ramsey* if you try and *make* me!"

The severity of her reaction made him certain there was cause for it. Leaning in close to David, he whispered, "I'm sorry, Mr. Cocoran. She's probably been sexually abused, given that reaction. She'll *have* to be examined."

Trying to protect his daughter, David shook his head and whispered back. "Couldn't it just be because they treated her like a *boy*? I mean, if they *pushed* her to be a boy, they might have made her *fear* that part of her, *right*?"

Shrugging, Lyle leveled with him. "There's no way to tell until she's been *examined*, Mr. Cocoran. I *promise*, she'll be treated with *respect* and *dignity*."

"No!" Christina shouted as she practically leapt from the couch and her mother's embrace. "You're just like Officer *Martinez*! You don't care *what* happens to me! You only care about *Walt*! You can't *touch* me there without *permission*! Well, you're not *getting* it!"

"Just *calm down* there, Christina!" Agent Kent finally spoke, moving in to keep the girl from getting violent. "Nobody is going to *hurt* you anymore! We only want to *help* you! We care just as much about *you* as we care about *Walt*, alright? You have to *cooperate* so we can get him back to his *parents*!"

"You're *lying*!" she yelled, backing away from him. "You wanna take me away from my *parents*! You don't care about *anyone*!"

Seeing the situation getting out of hand, Lyle shook his head. "We're going to have to take her to our field office, Mr. Cocoran. We're not going to get anything else out of her here." Nodding to Richard, the two worked together to prevent her escape as Lyle tried to take her hand. What he got was a jab to the nose that surprised him so much he had to back away.

Trying to restrain the girl alone, Richard wasn't prepared for the heel stomp to his instep, wincing and retreating.

"Christina!" Ruth shouted. "*Please*, baby! *Try* to calm down!"

Turning on her mother, Christina was in a rage. "I won't *let* them, Mother! I *won't*! It's *wrong*!"

"*Christina*!" David barked loudly enough to make the girl jump and turn to him with eyes wide. "That's *enough*! *Sit*!"

Swallowing hard, the cowed girl sat down as ordered, expecting the men to move in again and take her away.

Turning to the lead FBI Agent, David calmed his voice. "Agent Stewart? If I may suggest, she won't do you any good if you treat her like... *evidence!*" Try as he might, his voice had turned harsh. "She's a scared eleven-year-old *girl* and my *daughter!* I won't *let* you hurt her trying to get *Walt* back!"

Seeing the way the girl responded to her father, Lyle had a new idea. "Mr. Cocoran? Would you be willing to go with us down to the field office? She seems to *listen* to you and you can ensure that she's well-treated while there."

Thinking about it a moment, he looked hard at the man. "How long can I stay with her?"

"As long as you can stand the *coffee!*" he tried to lighten the mood.

"I'm going, *too!*" Ruth insisted. "You're not leaving me here all *alone!*"

"I'm *sorry*, Mrs. Cocoran." the agent apologized. "Your influence isn't helpful to the investigation. Besides, you need to stay *here* in case Walt comes back, *remember?*"

"But Walt is..." she began before remembering that in their eyes, Walt was a different person than her daughter.

"Walt is *what*, Mrs. Cocoran?" Lyle jumped on her near slip.

Thinking quickly, she looked at Christina and tried to calm down. "Um... I was going to say Walt is not coming back on his *own*. We *know* that now, don't we?"

"We just don't *know*." Lyle admitted. "Walt could get *away* from them. If he *does*, he's most *likely* to try and come *here*. Would you want him to come home to an *empty house?*"

Caught in their own deception, Ruth sadly shook her head.

Turning sympathetic, Lyle stepped up to her. "*Believe* me, Mrs. Cocoran. I *do* understand what you're going through. You *just* found out that Christina is your daughter, a daughter you didn't even know you *had* until today, and now I'm asking you to let us take her away, so soon after losing your *son*. I *promise* you, I'll do everything I *can* to see to it that you'll get her, *and* Walt, back as soon as possible. OK?"

Swallowing hard, Ruth straightened up. "A... alright. I'll *stay*." Reaching out to Christina, she folded the girl into a loving embrace. "I just *found* you, my baby girl! I promise I'll do anything I can to get you home again!" Looking up at Agent Stewart, her soft expression turned hard. "*Anything!*"

Letting her mother go, Christina sighed. "Don't worry Mother. Daddy will be with me. I'll be OK."

Taking his daughter's hand, David smiled down at her. Ready to go, s... sweetheart?" he self-corrected, nearly calling her 'sport' again. Seeing her nod, he looked up at Agent Stewart. "Do we go in your car or can I take her in mine?"

"You'll have to come in ours, Mr. Cocoran." Lyle explained. "We can't let her out of our custody... not even for a car ride." Nodding to Ruth, he turned and headed for the door. "Come on, Rich! We'll get you patched up at the office!"

Limping after his partner, Richard shook his head. "Man! I'm *never* gonna live this down! Taken out by a junior Sarah Michelle *Gellar!*"

The four made their way to the agency car, David and Christina sitting together in the back seat. Once they were on their way, Lyle struck up a conversation.

"So where have you been, Christina? We sure looked all over for you!"

Looking up at David, she then turned to face the back of Agent Stewart's head. "I... um... I slept in a box behind a strip mall last night. Then I wrote that letter to Mother and Daddy. I was getting tired of running, so I went to their house and then you came."

Nodding, he saw how it could have happened. "Your clothes look clean for having slept on the streets last night. Did Mrs. Cocoran wash them for you?"

Not expecting that, Christina shrugged. "I took a bath and they were clean when I went to put them back on." It was the closest thing to the truth that she could manage.

After twenty minutes of near silence, the car pulled into the parking garage. A short walk later Christina was shown into an interview room, while David was permitted to watch through a one-way mirror in the next room.

Lyle smiled when he sat down across from Christina and the caseworker assigned to her by the Arizona Department of Child Safety who was there to ensure the girl's rights were protected. He knew Nancy Boyd and had worked with her on other cases involving child witnesses. "Hi, Nancy."

Looking over the paperwork that she'd been handed less than five minutes earlier, she was still trying to get caught up on the case. "Huh? Oh, hi Lyle. Give me a minute?" Taking it, the three sat in silence for a moment before her brow furrowed. "She has *no* documentation?"

"None." Lyle admitted. "No *birth* record, school *transcripts*... *nothing*."

"Then she's an illegal." the woman assumed, not even having looked at the girl seated next to her.

"Not unless she snuck in from *Sweden*, Nancy!" Seeing the caseworker look at her charge, he laughed. "No, this is a *weird* one. We believe Christina

there was abducted at birth and sold to a family involved in another child abduction case. She's the new victim's twin sister. It's all in there." he pointed at the thick folder she was holding.

"OK. So what's the situation? Just give it to me in *brief*, Lyle. I don't have *time* to read through all this!" Spending five minutes on the particulars of the case, Nancy listened as she continued skimming the files. "OK, I *think* I've got it now." Turning to Christina, the woman looked serious. "Alright, Christina. You need to tell Agent Stewart there *everything* he asks about so we can find your brother." Sitting back, she let Lyle take over.

"Tell me about where you grew up." he started.

"I... um... I don't know *where* I was before I was taken to my parents' house. *Honest!* No one ever *told* me where I was before then!"

"Do you know where you are *now*?" he probed.

"Yeah. This is Phoenix." she replied easily.

"Earlier I asked you if you knew the names of the people that raised you, but you got quiet. Do you know who they are?"

Looking in his eyes, Christina hit on an answer she could give. "I only ever called them Mother and Daddy. *I* didn't hear their names growing up. They called me *Walt* and treated me like a boy growing up, even though I'm a girl."

Nancy looked up at that. "You didn't mention *that*, Lyle!"

"Sorry! There's a lot *to* this case!" he apologized. "It's..."

"...in the *file*." she finished with him. Turning to Christina, she looked at her carefully. "How is it you have long hair and look so much like a girl, but you say they raised you like a boy?"

Thinking a moment, Christina looked over to her. "When I was brought here, I was allowed to have longer hair than I used to have. It was normally short. I never *had* long hair before then."

"They must have been planning on switching out the kids for a while." Lyle noted. "Christina? How long did it take to get from where you grew up to here? Hours? *Days*?"

"I went to sleep the night before and when I woke up the next morning I was in Walt's bed. I don't remember being moved at all." she gave him.

"What time did you go to bed the night before?"

"Um... around nine. That was my usual bedtime."

"That's less than nine hours travel time. Assuming they don't have access to a plane, that puts them within four hundred miles of here. Could be anywhere from LA to El Paso and almost as far north as Salt Lake! *Damn!*" Thinking a moment he added, "Was the place in the desert?" Seeing her nod, he asked, "Was it a big city or out in the country?"

"It was a *city*." Christina admitted vaguely. "The first time *I* could walk around streets though was after I was brought *here*."

"How did you evade the police so long then?" he pressed, feeling she was keeping something back.

"I guess I just got *lucky*." she answered with a smile. "You'd have probably caught me sooner or *later*, though. I *really* didn't know *what* I was going to do after I ran away from Officer Martinez."

Trying to keep up, Nancy looked at Lyle. "How *sure* are you that Christina is the biological child of the Cocorans?"

"Fifty percent match to both parents. That makes it a ninety-nine point nine-nine percent chance that she's their daughter. Her age fits with her being Walt's fraternal twin as well, so we consider it a done-deal."

"Well, I'll need to look into it, but I think child abandonment charges might be brought against them." she shook her head.

"That doesn't fit the *facts*, Nancy!" Lyle argued. "Everything points to their *doctor* being the one to *abduct* their child!"

"Which they failed to *report*!" she countered.

"They were told she was *stillborn*!"

"There's no Fetal Death Certificate filed! We only have their *word* that they were told that! That's not *enough*! They may be guilty of human trafficking by selling their own *child* and are trying to cover it up now! Don't say it can't *happen*, Lyle! I see it all the *time*!"

"My parents didn't give me up!" Christina shouted. "My parents never *knew* they had a girl! The people that raised me told me that my parents thought that Walt was their only child!"

Leaning back, Lyle shook his head, amazed that *he* was the one standing up for Christina's rights here instead of the one appointed to the task. "Nancy! I already *checked* on the Cocorans! Their full financial report is in the file! *No irregularities*! Not a *cent* unaccounted for! Ruth Cocoran is an accountant that keeps *meticulous* records... that they turned over to us *freely*!"

"That in *itself* is suspicious!" she said in a raised voice. "*Nobody* accounts for *every* penny! They're obviously *faked*! She's an *accountant*, so she has the knowledge of how to *do* it! I'm going to start proceedings against them as soon as I get back! This interview is *over*! Christina is coming with *me*!"

Standing up quickly, Lyle glared at her. "Like *hell* she is! She's a material witness in a child *abduction* case! You take her from *this* building without *my* release and I'll have you arrested for *obstruction*!"

"You can't *do* that!" she snapped. "I have immunity from prosecution!"

"Only under *Arizona* law, not under *Federal* law!" Lyle burst her bubble. "What the hell is going *on*, Nancy?"

Cowed, the caseworker took a moment to collect her thoughts. "Um... *Lyle*, I'm under a lot of pressure to see to it that *any* potential case of abuse is fully investigated. In my view, the Cocorans need to be investigated. If I let this go, I could lose my *job*!"

"*Fine*!" he barked. "*Do* your investigation! But I'm telling you *this*, Nancy! I *know* these people! They've already lost *one* child I intend to get back for them, and they lost *Christina* here for *eleven years*! You try and take their daughter away without an absolutely *airtight* case against them and *I'll* testify in their hearing as both a character witness on *their* behalf, and also as an *impeaching* witness against *you* as her caseworker!" Sitting back down, the agent took a breath and looked over at Christina, who'd sat silently and just watched the exchange. Winking at her, he smiled when she winked back.

"Now, shall we get back to the interview?" he urged calmly.

An hour later, Nancy Boyd stormed out of the interview room with nothing but her briefcase; the case file left on the table and Christina left in Lyle's custody. Escorting the girl out of the room and over to her waiting father, he smiled as David took her in his arms and lifted her easily into a hug; the happy sound of giggling filling the normally somber work area.

Walking over to the agent with his daughter walking hand-in-hand next to him, David smiled at him. "You're a good man, Agent Stewart! That was

incredible! I swear, when she threatened to take Christina away, I almost *lost* it! Thank you!"

Dismissing the thanks with a wave of his hand, Lyle scoffed. "Bah! Don't *sweat* it. I've worked with her before. Nancy is a good lady, but she sees too many bad situations. So now she sees every parent as guilty until proven innocent. She hung herself when she threatened to have Christina moved to Tucson to ensure she had no contact with you or Ruth. Until we find Walt, Christina's our only lead." Sighing and looking down at the girl, he shook his head. "I just wish she could give us more to *go* on."

"I'm sorry, Agent Stewart." Christina apologized. "I just can't tell you any more than what I already have." Looking up at her father, she frowned. "Are Mother and Daddy going to get in trouble because of me?"

Looking up at David, he answered her truthfully. "They're going to need a lawyer sweetie, but I think they'll be OK!" Finishing with a smile, he petted Christina's head. "DCS will be sending over another caseworker later. Until then, she's still in my custody. I'm gonna call a friend of mine over there. I'll make sure Christina gets a fair shake!"

"I believe you!" David smiled back. "What happens until then?"

"How about lunch?" Lyle offered.

Sitting together in the cafeteria, the three sat in silence for a few minutes before Lyle asked what was on his mind.

"Mr. Cocoran..."

"*Please!*" David interrupted him. "Call me Dave!"

Nodding, the agent started again. "Lyle. Dave? I get the feeling that there's more going on here than you've told me. Do you have *any* idea who might

have taken Walt now that you know about Christina? I ask because I just can't get my gut to shut up... and my gut is telling me that I'm not getting the whole story."

Shaking his head, David sighed. "I wish I could tell you *more*, Lyle. I really *do*. I just want my *family* back." Turning to his daughter, David looked at her. "I *honestly* have no idea where Walt's been taken, and at *this* moment, *Christina's* gotta be my priority. Today I found out I had a *daughter*... and I'll be *damned* if anyone's gonna take her away from me *again*!"

Chapter 10 - Fostering Growth

Looking in the mirror, Christina sighed and tried to bring her smile back. It had been two weeks since she'd last seen David or Ruth and her optimistic attitude had begun to wane under the stress of missing them.

After the new caseworker had arrived, Lyle had resumed questioning her, hoping to glean some new piece of information about her 'abductors'. She did her best to answer every question without lying, but several times she'd been stuck for an answer and just shrugged or remained silent.

As evening approached, Lyle had given up for the day and remanded custody over to her caseworker with instructions to produce her the next morning for further questioning. Thinking about Charlene Dawson, her caseworker, she smiled a little. Unlike Nancy, Charlene actually seemed to care about her. While she still insisted that DCS needed to conduct an investigation into her parents, she wasn't as eager to see the worst in everyone.

"Hey *Christina!*" Robert pounded on the bathroom door. "Move it or *lose* it! *Some* of us need to get ready for school!"

Rolling her eyes, Christina finished brushing her teeth quickly before unlocking and opening the bathroom door.

Pushing his way in, Robert Beck pinned her against the door. "No need to lock the *door*, Christina! You should be more... *open!*"

Christina sneered as she shoved the fourteen-year-old foster child away. "In your *dreams*, Robert! Don't make me *repeat* my lesson on bad *touches!* I don't think your *manhood* could *take* it again!" Stalking away, she stormed into the bedroom she shared with Lisa, the natural child of Sarah and John Hollander... her foster parents.

"Robert being a *dick* again?" Lisa asked as she packed her backpack.

Shying away from the thirteen-year-old's typical vulgar language, Christina nodded. "He just won't *quit!* Why won't your mom *do* something about it?"

Shrugging, Lisa flung the pack onto her shoulder while Christina sat on her bed. "Nothing she *can* do. She lays a finger on *any* of us and it's '*adiós, muchachos*' to all *four* of us! DCS will have us *all* out of here and in foster homes faster than you can say, 'federal funds'."

Stepping up to the girl, Lisa poked a finger at her. "So don't rock the *boat!* Mom and Dad were nice enough to give you a place to stay when you didn't have *squat!* Not even more than one *outfit!*" Hearing her brother Don honk his horn, Lisa backed out. "And don't touch any of my *stuff* today! I see one *sock* out of place and you'll be sleeping without a *blanket* tonight!" At that she ran off, along with Robert, thundering down the hall and slamming out the door.

Trying to see the positive and failing, Christina knelt down next to the bed she used, which was really nothing more than some foam padding with a sheet and blanket.

God? It's Christina again. I know you must be sick of hearing from me with the same thing every time, but it's getting so hard to be a good girl here! Lisa is mean and Robert is scary! Mrs. Hollander won't do anything to protect me, and Mr. Hollander is hardly ever here! I didn't want to kick Robert! Since then though, Mrs. Hollander's been using it as an excuse as to why I can't see Mother or Daddy! She says I'm violent and need to be kept home, and she won't let them come here!

The only one who is even a little nice is Don. He won't let Robert near me when he's around, and Lisa needs him to drive her to school so she doesn't have to use the bus, so she does whatever he says. I'm just glad he says for her to leave me alone!

I'm doing all my schoolwork! I like school 'cuz I can use the computer where I can email Kathy! I miss her so much! She's been so sad lately. I haven't been able to see her since Daddy first took me to the FBI office. I know that you know all this stuff, but I just wanted to ask if you could cheer her up.

I'm going to see Agent Stewart again today, that's why I'm not in school. I think I should tell him about how bad it is here, but I don't want to worry Daddy. I know he watches from behind the glass.

I have to tell you something. If Robert tries to touch me again, I'm going to hurt him. Bad. It was bad enough when Agent Stewart made me get touched there to see if I'd ever been molested. At least the doctor was a woman, so it didn't feel so icky, but I won't let a boy touch me. Ever! I don't care about my promise! It's...

"Chris!" Sarah Hollander shouted from the door of the bedroom. "What have I told you about that *shit*? Get up off your *ass* and get started on the *dishes*! I won't have you wasting time praying to your 'invisible friend' when there's *work* to get done! *Move* it, missy!"

Christina quickly said "Amen." under her breath before getting up to go to the kitchen.

"Just for *that*, you get to vacuum the floors after I take you downtown!" she barked as she followed the girl down the hall. "I won't have *religion* in this house! I'll work you to *death* if I have to, until you *grow up*! There is no *God*! There's no *Santa*, no *Easter Bunny*, no *Tooth Fairy*, and no *angels* watching over you! This is all there *is* until you *die* and then there's *nothing*!"

Continuing her lecture on atheism, Sarah watched as Christina did all the breakfast dishes and the dinner dishes from the night before. By the time she finished, it was time to go. Even as she rode in the car, Sarah continued to berate her for believing in anything she couldn't prove empirically. Walking into the building with the woman, she finally smiled when she saw her father.

"*Daddy!*" she yelled as she started to run to him, but Sarah kept hold of her hand and wouldn't let her go. When the woman slowed down, it made getting to her father take that much longer to the impatient girl. At last reaching him, her enthusiasm was lost; the weight of her situation crushing her spirit.

"Don't I get a *hug?*" David asked hopefully.

"That's *inappropriate*, Mr. Cocoran!" Sarah snapped. "Ask *again* and I'll tell DCS that you're trying to *molest* her! It's bad *enough* that her head's been filled with *fairytales!* Don't *worry* though! I'm getting her straightened *out!* DCS *told* us you sold her when she was born! It's *your* fault!"

"Mrs. Hollander, we were *cleared* of those charges! she was... *hidden...* from us!" Calming down, he looked at his daughter. "How you *doing*, kiddo?"

Swallowing, she shrugged. "*OK*, I guess."

Reaching out to take her hand, he watched as Sarah pulled her away from him. The disappointment on her face crushed the huge man's heart.

"No *touching*, Mr. Cocoran!" she snapped. "I'm *warning* you! If I had *my* way, a man like *you* would never be *allowed* around children! You let your son be *abducted* and you're not even *doing* anything about it! I don't even know why you *come* here anymore! Agent Stewart doesn't *need* you! *I* can keep Chris under control!"

"Any chance to see my *daughter*, I'll *take* it, Mrs. Hollander." David growled. "Even if it means putting up with *you!* And her name is *Christina!*" Looking down at her, he smiled. "Chris is *much* too boyish a name for her. She's had quite enough of *that* in her life."

Scoffing, Sarah walked around him, nearly dragging Christina behind her. Following his daughter, David ached to hold her, but kept his distance so as

to not raise the ire of the hopelessly corrupt DCS. *Eleven days*. he reminded himself. Reaching the interview room, Charlene and Lyle were already there. Dragging Christina in, Sarah practically threw the girl to them.

"You're *late*." Lyle stated evenly.

"Chris was *dawdling*." Sarah snapped back. "Bad enough that you have to disrupt our schedule for me to drag her down here again. I *do* have *other* children to take care of! When do I pick her up?"

"Five o'clock." Lyle answered. "Don't be *late*."

Turning with a frustrated huff, Sarah stormed out of the room, nearly running into David as she did. "Get *away* from me, you *goon*!" she yelled, shoving him away before storming past him and walking quickly from the building.

Smiling at the morose girl, Lyle shook his head and made a note. "How are you, Christina?"

Turning to see her father standing just outside the door, she sighed and turned back to him. "Fine, Agent Stewart."

Lyle nodded towards David. "There's a man outside who looks like he could really use a *hug*!" Seeing her finally smile, he delighted in watching the girl turn and run to her father.

Kneeling down, David wrapped his massive arms around Christina as her own flew around his neck. "That's more *like* it!" he sighed in contentment.

Barely keeping her tears at bay, the affection-starved girl just reveled in his warm embrace. "I... I *missed* you, Daddy! I'm sorry that I messed up and now I can't visit you and Mother!"

"You did nothing *wrong*, beautiful!" he encouraged her. "Just like I *taught* you?" he whispered.

"Yes, Daddy!" she whispered back. Letting him go, she turned and entered the interview room.

Hours went by with Lyle asking the same questions he'd asked dozens of times before, each time comparing it to her previous answers, hoping that this time she might have some new nugget of evidence that he could turn into a lead. The case hadn't had any movement since the day she was taken into custody and he needed a break.

With only thirty minutes left until five o'clock, Lyle turned and looked at the one-way mirror. "*Dave?* Come on in here." Waiting a moment, he saw the girl's father fill the doorway. "Take a seat." he gestured to one of the empty chairs.

Taking the one next to Christina and opposite Charlene, he looked at Lyle with concern. "What's *up*, Lyle?"

Taking a breath, the worn out agent grimaced. "I'm *sorry*, Dave. Christina hasn't come up with anything I can use, it's been a month since Walt was taken, and I'm getting pressure from my supervisor to move on to other more active cases. I won't be calling Christina down for any more interviews. She just doesn't know anything *useful*."

"You're giving *up*?" David asked, trying to keep his tone even.

"I'm sorry!" Lyle ached. "We just don't have any *leads*! There's no *camera* footage, no clue to their *identity*, no trace *evidence*, and Christina's composite descriptions are so generic it could be you and *Ruth*! There's just nothing *left*! The case will stay open, but... I just can't justify any more time on it. His picture is out there, so maybe we'll get lucky, but until then we just have to move on. You do *too*."

"We *can't*." David sighed. "Not until we at *least* have Christina home."

"How's Ruth holding up?"

Shrugging, David glanced at his daughter and shook his head subtly. "She's OK. *Working*. Better than *me* these days! I'm on temporary Leave of Absence from the dealership. I'm welcome back anytime, but he gets it. Good thing I got an understanding boss!"

"Lucky *you!*" Lyle quipped.

Listening to their exchange, Charlene checked her notes. "Well, if that's the case, I want to advise you Mr. Cocoran that DCS will be moving to relocate Christina to Tucson in the next ten days. There's a foster family there that's been waiting for a preteen girl for three months."

Having read about other incidents with DCS in the news, David was actually expecting this. "We have our custody hearing next *Friday*." David pointed out. "That's in *eleven* days! She's *required* to appear! We have a *subpoena!*"

Looking over her paperwork, she nodded. "OK, I see that. I have it here. I have a lot of *cases!* I was told we needed to move her out of the Hollander home within the next ten days because they'll be going out of state and won't be able to care for Christina or their other foster child for a time."

"They're all going to go on vacation to Disneyland." Christina offered in explanation. "Just *them*, though."

Seeing an opportunity, Lyle looked at Charlene. "Ms. Dawson? Might I make a suggestion? Rather than uproot Christina to Tucson only to have to bring her back in a few days for the hearing, why not place her in the custody of the *Cocorans*? After *all*, they *are* her biological parents, have a stable home

life, and I can vouch for their character. Can they be considered a form of kinship foster family in their unique case?"

"Unfortunately, *no*." Charlene explained. "Per state regulations, a kinship placement must be a person or persons with a significant relationship to the child who are *not* the birth parents."

Ready with his own plan, David nodded. "How about Ruth's *parents*? Would *they* fall into those guidelines?"

Looking at him in surprise, Charlene was speechless for a moment. "W... why weren't they brought up for placement *before* now?"

"By the time we could reach them to tell them they had a granddaughter, Christina was already in the Hollander home. Since everything seemed OK there at first, we didn't ask them to come from Boston. With recent events, they agreed to come here to care for Christina. They just rented a house."

Thinking a moment, Charlene nodded. "Alright. They'll need to submit their fingerprints for a background check and the house will need to be inspected before placement." Checking her calendar, she winced. "With doing all that, the soonest I have for the home inspection is three weeks from now. We'll have to go forward with the move to Tucson and then address this when they're ready."

"What if I could get you their background check *today*?" Lyle offered.

"What?" she asked in astonishment.

Opening the thick folder in front of him, Lyle leafed through it, stopped, and pulled out several sheets. "Here. I have other copies." Seeing her surprise, Lyle shrugged. "When Walt first went missing, we looked into the idea of a family abduction. I ran a check on Ruth's parents as a matter of course."

Smiling as she read the reports, Charlene nodded. "*Perfect!* Let's see... in *that* case, I can do the home inspection next *Monday* instead of processing the background check! She has to be out of the Hollander home by Thursday evening, but if the home check is OK, we can have her transferred to their custody Monday night!" Happy that she was able to help, it also saved her the paperwork of transferring Christina to Tucson and then more work to have her brought back for the hearing, then even more work later to transfer her to her grandparents' custody.

Nancy Boyd fumed with anger. She had finally arranged to get Christina transferred to Tucson and placed into the foster home she'd selected; one that would ensure Christina would quietly disappear in a series of rapid transfers from one home to another. To have it stopped just days from the transfer was infuriating. *That idiot Charlene! Damn it! Just when I had everything perfect, that goodie-two-shoes goes and blows it! Those monsters are going to get her back if Christina ends up with her own grandparents! I can't even louse up their background check!*

Livid that the DA refused to prosecute the Cocorans due to lack of evidence, Nancy had thought that she'd set up the perfect way to keep Christina in the system for six years, getting much needed federal funds for each year. The real pleasure though was ensuring that her parents could never see her again, getting justice in her mind for them allowing Walt to be abducted and for Christina being sold at birth. *It's all their fault!* she raged internally. *I know they're guilty! Good people are never who we deal with! We wouldn't be called in unless they were bad! These two are no different!*

Trying to think of a way to stop the transfer, she smiled wickedly. *If they fail the home inspection, Christina goes to Tucson and I keep another name on the rolls for the next six years! In a few months she won't even want to go back to them, even if they do find her!* Typing at her computer for several minutes, she set things up to make sure that the Robbins' home inspection was going to fail.

Walking down the hall to her shared room, Christina was worn from work. True to her word, Sarah had made her vacuum all the floors before she was allowed to eat. Remembering the day before her transformation, she shook her head at the difference love made. *I was happy to do it for Mother and Daddy. Mrs. Hollander makes it a punishment.*

"Christina?" came a voice from the room across from hers and Lisa's.

Pausing, the girl went up to the partially open door and slowly pushed it clear, seeing a sight that made her almost smile. *Almost.* "Hi, Don."

Lying on the bed and holding a magazine, the sixteen-year-old got up and smiled down at her. "What'd you do that made Mom so mad she had you vacuum the whole house?"

Wandering into his room, Christina shrugged. "She caught me praying to God again. I had to do the dishes this morning, too."

"So why *do* it?" Don sneered. "Nobody's there *anyway!*"

About to leave at hearing such raw anger, Christina stopped and looked at Donald. Tilting her head curiously, she instead stepped closer, looked around the room to see if anyone was around, and pushed the door nearly closed. "Don? Why are you so *sad* when you say that?"

Sitting down in a chair frustratedly, the teen stared at the ceiling. "*I* don't know. Probably because I wish there *was* somebody there!"

"There *is*, Don." Christina stated. "*I know* there is. He... um... let's just say He *helped* me once. Once *I* was sad all the time. I tried *not* to be, but the hurt never stopped. Not *ever!* I don't want you to be sad! You should never let the hurt corrupt your *heart!*" Suddenly seeing something new in Don, she really looked at him. "Don? Why are you *really* so sad?"

With a shrug, Don looked at her and sighed. "Doesn't matter. I can't *fix* it!"

Stepping closer, she looked around the teen's room again, this time seeing it was very familiar. There were no pictures on the walls; no personality to the room at all. It could belong to *anyone*. It was orderly, but cluttered with things that looked like they might as well be props on a movie set, they were so randomly but carefully placed.

It was just like the room Christina grew up in.

Looking to the teenager who was staring at the ceiling once more, Christina tried to imagine him as a her... and everything clicked into place.

"Don?" she began delicately. "Do... do you know why I'm *here*?"

Looking at her emptily, Don shrugged again. "Something about your parents selling you to some other people when you were born, you were raised by them, then they dumped you back with your parents."

"There's *more*." she expanded. "I was raised as a *boy*. They called me *Walt*."

Sitting up, Don looked at her with eyes wide. "No *way*! Oh *man*! That is just *so* messed up! I know *just* how... I mean... you're *way* too much of a girl to be raised as a boy! You're so... *pretty*."

Hearing the jealousy and slight feminine inflection in the reaction, she knew she was right. "Don? Um... I... I want to ask you something, but I don't want you to get... *upset*. Can I ask you without you getting mad?"

Looking over the girl, Don felt the jealousy raging, but was intent on keeping it in check. "Um... sure."

Stepping closer, Christina nearly shook with fear. "Do... do you wish you were... um... *pretty*? Like *me*? I wouldn't mind at all! I... I *understand* that."

About to yell at her to get out, the teen stopped and saw her hopeful and knowing eyes. *Oh shit! She knows! That means I'm acting too girly again! If she can tell and she's only eleven, it must be obvious to everyone!* Fear gripping her heart, she almost shrank away from Christina. "W... why would you say *that?*"

"Because I was just *like* you before I was brought to my parents... I knew I was a *girl*, but I had to live like a *boy*. I... I guess I just recognize something *familiar* in you. Am... am I *wrong?*"

Glancing at the door, she got up and moved down on one knee close to Christina and took her gently by the shoulders. "You can't say *anything* about that, Christina! I... I can't let anyone *know!* I *have* to be a boy! Mom would *kill* me if she knew!"

"But *why?*" she pressed quietly. "I mean, you'd be a *beautiful* girl, Don! You would *totally* pass for a natural girl!" Pausing a moment, she bit her lower lip. "What's your *real* name?"

"Still Dawn, just with an 'a' 'w' instead of an 'o'." she explained. "That's why I started making everyone call me 'Don' instead of... um... '*Donald*'." She spat her given name like a curse word.

Smiling, Christina took Dawn's hands. "That's a really pretty name, Dawn! That's why you grow your hair long, too? It's *beautiful* when it's out of that pony tail!"

Blushing, Dawn looked at the floor. "No! If *anyone* here is beautiful, it's *you*, Christina!" Sitting on the floor with one leg tucked under her rear, the teen waited while Christina did the same. "I... I wish I could be a beautiful girl like you! Then my life would be so *perfect!*"

Sighing at her blissful ignorance, Christina shook her head.

"What?" Dawn tilted her head.

"No you *don't*, Dawn!" the little girl answered. "*Think* about it! If you woke up one morning and were actually a girl, would anyone even *know* you?"

"Well, if it *did* happen, like with magic or something, everyone would *know* I was always a girl!"

"You so *sure* about that?" Christina pressed. "That would mean changing *history*... which means you wouldn't be *you* anymore! You'd be someone *else* that took your place!"

"OK, so just my *body*, then! If I could be a *real* girl, even if no one knew *how*, at least I'd be *happy* for once! Everyone would *have* to accept me as a girl then!"

"Why *would* they? This is the twenty-first *century*, Dawn! No one believes in *miracles* anymore! They would just think you were someone *else* and that *you* were missing!"

"But I'd be a *girl*!" Dawn insisted. "Eventually they'd *have* to accept that I'm still me and that I turned into a girl!"

"No, they'd insist it's *impossible*!" she pointed out from experience. "You'd end up in *foster care* because your own *parents* wouldn't know you!" Going over all the problems she'd had in the last month, Christina used them as hypothetical examples.

"Wow!" Dawn was impressed. "You've really thought this *through*!"

Biting her lower lip, Christina glanced at the door, thankful she could still hear the TV in the distance, meaning the others were zoned out in front of some show. "Um... Dawn? If I tell you a secret, will you *promise* not to tell?"

Scooting in closer, Dawn reveled in the idea of letting her hair down and having 'girl time' with someone who saw her for who she really was. "Sure! I *promise* I won't tell!"

Taking a moment, Christina closed her eyes. "I... um... wasn't abducted when I was born. I was like you. I was born a boy." Going through the entire incredible story, Christina watched Dawn absorb it all with a skeptical expression, but never interrupted.

When at last the little girl had finished her story, Dawn shook her head. "But that's *impossible!* There's no such *thing* as angels!"

"*See?*" Christina sighed and looked at the floor. "That's what I was *talking* about. You *want* it to be real and *you* don't believe it! It happened to *me* and sometimes even *I* don't believe it! Sometimes I even think that my life as Walt was just a big *delusion* and I always *was* a girl on the outside. If it weren't for the fact that I don't have a birth certificate, which is why I'm *here*, I'd give up and stop believing in God. I miss Mother and Daddy... and my best friend Kathy! I just... I want my *old* life back, but I can't *have* it."

"Are you *crazy?*" Dawn scoffed. "You got the best thing *ever!* You get to be a *girl!*"

"Sure." Christina moped. "I get to be a girl that lives in *foster* care with *nothing* while my parents go *nuts* trying to get me *out!* *Hurray.*"

Seeing how sad she was, Dawn grimaced. "Well, it's a cool *story*, anyway. Kinda like some of my sci-fi books! Maybe you should write it! There aren't *enough* stories out there about girls like me, except *porn.*"

Blushing, Christina looked away. "Um... why do you think you can't tell your mom? I mean, she can't exactly use *religious* arguments against it!"

Looking toward the door, Dawn shuddered. "Mom caught me wearing some of Lisa's clothes a few times when we were still close to the same size. She totally *flipped!* She said that if it got out that I was trans, she might lose her position as a foster parent and they'd lose the money they get, so she'd have to go back to work." Looking at the floor, Dawn felt the tear rolling down her cheek. "She... um... she *punished* me. *Bad.*"

Reaching out to the trapped girl, Christina put her hand on Dawn's knee. "*How bad?*"

Dawn looked away and just shook her head, refusing to say.

"Oh, *Dawn!*" Christina cried as she leaned forward and hugged the teen. "I don't know what to say! I wish I could help, but I can't even help *myself.*"

Returning the affection, Dawn sighed in relief. *Even though she's a little wacky, it still feels so good to just let go and be me! I wish I could have this all the time!*

Breaking their embrace, Christina looked back toward the door. "I better get back to Lisa's room. It wouldn't be good for you if anyone knew what we were talking about!"

"Yeah." Dawn sighed unhappily. "Thanks for understanding, Christina. I... I'm gonna *miss* you after we go!"

"I'll miss you *too.*" she replied. "At least I'll be going to my grandparents' house, and you'll be going to *Disneyland!*" she tried to see the best of their separation.

Shrugging, Dawn moved back to her bed. "Yeah, but not the way I *want* to go. I wish I could be a Disney Princess just *once!*"

Heading for the door, Christina smiled. "Just be *patient.* Maybe *someday!*"

Chapter 11 - Gut Instinct

Climbing out of the car, Lyle knew he was on shaky ground. Officially, as an FBI agent, he had no reason or jurisdiction to be at the inspection of the home Ruth's parents had rented in order to take custody of Christina. Still, he hadn't been able to shake the feeling in his gut that if he *didn't* look into it, something *terrible* might happen. After twenty years of first being a cop and then an FBI agent, he'd learned to trust that instinct as it'd saved his life countless times. His hunch had paid off when he'd looked into Nancy's file.

The biggest red flag was when he found out that Nancy Boyd would be part of the inspection team. When the woman blew up in his interview room, he knew something was 'off'. Charlene's notice that Christina was being moved to Tucson was the clincher. Seeing she could bar the Robbins from taking custody to ensure it, he did some digging and found several irregularities. Twice she'd been in his interview room when her public records showed she'd been on home inspections. Digging further, he'd found an unusual number of visits to one foster home in Tucson, but it was her most recent activity that had told him what to expect *today*.

Walking up to Charlene and Nancy as they got out of their vehicle, Lyle smiled. "Morning, ladies!"

"What are *you* doing here?" Nancy asked in surprise.

"Just a follow-up on the Cocoran case." he stated nonchalantly. "This is my partner, Agent Kent." he gestured to the man in the walking cast.

"Morning." Richard grumbled.

"You don't have *jurisdiction* here!" Nancy growled. "You can't interfere!"

"Oh, we *won't*!" Lyle sang happily. "We're just here to observe and meet with the Robbins. I want to make sure they jive with their background checks."

"Just so long as that's *clear!*" the woman barked.

Walking up to the front door together, Nancy took charge and knocked on the door, only to have Charlene tap her on the shoulder.

"Excuse me, Ms. Boyd. I believe *I'm* the lead caseworker on this! Don't you think *I* should..."

"No." Nancy interrupted her. "*I'm* the *senior* caseworker! This is a *home inspection!* I've done *hundreds* of them! How many have *you* done?"

Cowed, Charlene cleared her throat. "Um... only *two*, but..."

"Then keep *quiet* and do what I *tell* you, Ms. Dawson!" Nancy ordered.

Just then the door opened to reveal a woman in her mid sixties, but her demeanor was anything but frail. Strength of will practically radiated from the woman. "May I *help* you?" Virginia Robbins intoned coldly.

Her turn to be unnerved, Nancy tried to bully her way through it as usual. "We're from the Arizona Department of Child Safety here to inspect your home before placement of Christina Doe. Let us in so we can get this done!"

Raising an eyebrow, Virginia stood silently.

"Christina *Doe?*" Charlene puzzled. "My records show her name as Christina *Cocoran*. That's the *basis* of this kinship placement."

"I redacted the files." Nancy smirked. "There's no corroborating paperwork showing a legal last name, so she *has* none. She's officially Christina Doe."

Walking up to the door next to his wife, Walter Robbins was holding a stack of papers. "*That's* funny, I have several FBI reports here, one of which is a

DNA report, that says her name is Christina *Cocoran*. That sounds like a legal surname to *me*."

Angry that her attempt to deny kinship placement by claiming there was no significant relationship was being thwarted by others having the DNA test results, Nancy tried to resolve the issue. "Reports created for DCS are *not* public records!" Nancy shouted, "You'll have to turn those papers over to me *immediately*, Mr. Robbins!"

"Those reports weren't *created* for DCS, Nancy." Lyle pointed out. "We gave them to you as a *courtesy*."

Wincing at being caught out, Nancy turned back to the older couple still standing behind their screen door. "Open the *door* Mr. Robbins, or I'll report that you refused us entry and your application as a kinship foster family will be *denied*! Do you want your *grandchild* today?"

"Sure thing." the man offered. "Just show me the paperwork."

"That's privileged information, Mr. Robbins! You aren't *allowed* to see it!"

"No, you're *required* by Arizona law to present it on request." he countered, citing the statute. "Do you want me to call your *supervisor* today?"

Frustrated, Nancy held out the order for home inspection. Opening the screen door, Walter took the paper, scanned it quickly, and handed it back to her. "I'm sorry, this order is invalid. The case number doesn't match the one for my granddaughter and her last name is filled in incorrectly. There are also several spelling errors throughout it." Leaning toward her, he changed to a conspiratorial tone. "Premises has an 'i' in the middle, not three 'e's.'"

"Very well then!" Nancy sneered. "You can either accept the order as-is or we'll have to go back and change it and come back *next* week!"

"Actually, I have the copy of the inspection order that *I* made, Ms. Boyd." Charlene interrupted. "I double-checked it and it looks to be in order." Handing the paper to Walter, she smiled in the satisfaction of being helpful.

Scanning it, Walter grinned at the woman ten years younger than Nancy. "Looks good to *me!*" he handed it back to her. "*Please!* Come in!"

Storming in past the couple, Nancy still had an ace up her sleeve to disqualify the home, but it was riskier. Pulling out her checklist, she started checking off items as she began making her way through the house while Charlene talked to the couple about their legal rights as a kinship foster family. Seeing her opportunity in their kitchen, Nancy reached into her pocket and pulled out the bag, intent on 'finding' it there.

"Well, well, *well!*" Lyle surprised her as his hand wrapped around hers with the bag still in it. "*Rich!* Come *here!* I need you to *see* this!"

Stunned that he'd caught her, Nancy immediately resorted to her usual bully tactics. "Get your hands *off* me Agent, or I'll have you *arrested* for *assault!*"

Richard came up to him and nodded at her trapped hand. "What *is* it, Lyle?"

Turning her hand over, he pried her fingers open and took the baggy. "I don't think that's *sweetener*, Rich!" Lyle quipped as he handed it to his partner.

Opening the baggy, he dipped a pinky in and tasted it. "Cocaine." Richard confirmed. "Looks like a couple grams."

Pulling out handcuffs, Lyle took great pleasure in what he did next. "Nancy Boyd? You're under arrest for possession!" Ratcheting them on her wrists, he pulled her into the living room while reciting her Miranda Rights.

"What's going *on?*" Charlene asked.

"I just arrested Ms. Boyd for possession of a *narcotic*." he stated calmly. "She pulled out a baggy of cocaine in plain sight in front of a federal agent. It's *my* belief she intended to claim she *found* it in their kitchen."

Looking at her co-worker, Charlene was stunned. "*Why?*"

"I don't have to say *anything!*" Nancy fumed. "I want a *lawyer!*"

"Makes me glad I *retired!*" Walter quipped.

"She's been trying to get Christina to Tucson since day *one*." Lyle offered in explanation. "Now what *I* wonder is *why*, and why she makes *monthly* visits to that *particular* foster home? Isn't it supposed to be *semi-annual*? Rich? You wanna see Ms. Boyd out? I'll stay and see that everything's what we're expecting." Seeing his partner nod and take the woman out to their car, he stepped up to the DCS caseworker. "*Sorry* about that, Charlene. Her being at a home to remove kids because of drug abuse that wasn't one of her cases told me her basic plan, so I *knew* what she was going to try to do, but I had to catch her in the act and I couldn't tell you beforehand."

Sitting down, she looked at him numbly. "I understand Agent Stewart."

Taking a seat across from her, he looked at Charlene. "I suspected *something* was wrong when Tucson came up *twice* for the same girl. I think something very *bad* is going on in that house. *I* have no probable cause to perform a search, but *you* can enter on demand on fear of revoking the foster family's license. Consider this an official 'tip' of suspected abuse."

Taking it all in, Charlene nodded. "A...Alright. I'll see what I can do."

"It'll be noted in Nancy's *arrest* report." he stated in a veiled threat that if she didn't follow up it would be on record somewhere that she knew and didn't do anything about it. "Anyway, let's get this inspection done so we can get Christina *home!*"

Putting the few clothes that DCS had given her in a plastic grocery bag, Christina was mostly happy to get out of the Hollander home. The one thing she would miss sat across from her on Lisa's bed.

"I'm sorry you have to go so *soon*." Dawn sighed. "I mean, we *just* got to know one another and now you're *going*! Who can I talk to that will *get* it?"

Putting aside one bag, the girl picked up the second to hold her underwear and socks. "I *know*! You could always look *online*! I'm sure there's more out there than just... um... *pornography*."

Dawn looked away sadly. "It won't be the *same*!" she complained. "I mean, you totally *get* it! I think I might even *believe* you about that crazy magic stuff! You understand being TG from a perspective only we can *get*!"

Setting down the second bag after finishing, she went over to Dawn and gave her a hug. "There! Now when you get *lonely*, you can know that someone *knows* you and *cares*!" Hearing a honk from outside, Christina brightened. "They're *here*! Come on!" Grabbing Dawn's hand, she dragged the girl down the hall and out the front door; Sarah, Lisa, and Robert nowhere in sight.

Charlene stood with Walter Robbins next to her car. Seeing the two run out the front door, Christina carrying all her worldly possessions in two plastic shopping bags, Walter nearly cried at the sight of her. *She looks just like Ruth when she was little!*

Running up to her grandfather, her pace slowed when she didn't see her parents. "Where's Mother and Daddy?" she asked Charlene.

"Your parents are fine!" the caseworker told her. "Christina? This is Walter Robbins. He's... well... your grandfather."

Kneeling down in front of her, Walter smiled weakly. "Hello, Christina!"

"Hi." she mumbled. "Um... this is Dawn." she glanced back at her friend. "Dawn's parents are the ones who've been taking care of me ever since... um... since I was taken from Mother and Daddy." she finished, looking at the ground.

Looking at the teen, Walter nodded. "Hello, Don. Come to see her off?"

"*Sorta.*" she answered, sticking her hands in her front pockets and kicking a loose stone lightly. "Christina's a pretty special *girl*. I tried to look *out* for her and help her as much as I *could*. I... I'm kinda sorry to see her *leave*, but I'm glad she's going to be with her *family*. She *deserves* it after what *she's* been through."

Nodding at her, Walter stood back up and extended a hand to Christina. "Here. Give me those bags and you say goodbye to your friend."

Handing off her meager belongings, she turned and hugged the teen who'd taken a knee to get down to her level. "I... I'll *miss* you, Dawn!"

Returning the hug, she felt the warmth of the sun leave her back. Looking up, she saw Charlene standing over her.

"That's enough, Don." the social worker warned her. While she understood that the two cared for one another, she had rules to enforce. One of them was to limit physical contact between older and younger foster siblings.

Letting the little girl go, Dawn stood up and stepped back. "It's OK. I get it. You got your rules."

"It's a pretty dumb rule that says I can't hug a *friend*!" Christina grumbled.

"I *know*, sweetie!" Charlene agreed. "Not *my* decision, though. You *ready*?" Seeing her nod, she took the girl's hand and led her to the open car door.

"Goodbye, Dawn!" she cried out as she got in. Once the door was closed, she rolled the window down and leaned out. "*Remember! Someone knows and cares! Just... have a little faith!*"

Seeing the girl disappear from the window, Dawn stood outside and watched as the car drove away, waving as it shrank into the distance before hanging her head and turning to go back inside. *Faith, huh? What the hell! I got nothing to lose! Besides, it'll irk the crap outta Mom!*

Christina rode in the car in silence while Walter and Charlene talked in the front seat; the caseworker reminding him of the rules they had to follow. When they finally got to the Robbins' residence, she began to get nervous. The last time she'd seen her grandmother had been her sixth birthday. Now she'd be living with the woman and didn't know what they knew of her circumstances. *Did Mother and Daddy tell them the truth or do they think that Walt is still missing?* she wondered.

Helping Christina out of the car, Charlene walked the girl up to the front door and into the house just behind Walter. Entering the living room, she saw Virginia standing there and was instantly intimidated by the woman's ramrod posture and overpowering presence. "Mrs. Robbins? I'd like you to meet *Christina*, your granddaughter."

Looking down at the girl, Virginia Robbins saw her daughter all over again. Walking up to the girl, she smiled. "It's good to finally *meet* you, *Christina*. You may call me Grandma Robbins."

Blushing at the woman's formal attitude, Christina remembered the last time she'd seen her. *I was always so afraid of Grandma Robbins! It was like she could see right through you!* "Um... h... hello, Grandma Robbins."

Reaching a hand out, the older woman waited until Christina took it before guiding her delicately to the couch. Sitting next to the girl, she sighed and

petted her head as the proper woman's air of dignity dissolved. "You... you look like your *mother*! I think I'd know you were my granddaughter if I met you on the street!" Leaning over, she wrapped her arms around the girl and cried in contentment when Christina returned the embrace.

Smiling at the loving scene, Charlene turned to Walter, who'd just put the few things his granddaughter had brought with her on the girl's bed before returning to the living room. "Alright, Mr. Robbins... one last time. The Cocorans are *not* to have *any* contact with Christina. Her court-appointed lawyer will be here tomorrow to go over the particulars of the hearing this Friday. It's unlikely they will be given custody, so you need to be prepared to raise Christina for the foreseeable future." Pulling out a pamphlet, she handed it to him. "If you need financial assistance, this will tell you who to contact. Support groups exist to *help* you, so you should make use of them. I'll be available if there are any problems, but if the birth parents try to take her, just call the police. Let *them* handle it!"

Raising his chin, Walter nodded vaguely. "Very well, Ms. Dawson. We won't be needing any financial assistance, though. I did very well in life and have more than enough set aside."

Smiling, the woman turned to see Christina and her grandma still hugging. "*Well!* I can see this is going to work out *very* well! *Goodbye*, Mr. Robbins!" Holding out her hand, she shook the ex-lawyer's and let him escort her to the door.

At last alone, Christina pulled out of Virginia's hug. "Grandma Robbins? Um... what were you told about me? I mean, about what *happened* to me?"

Noticing the concern on the girl's face, Virginia's expression returned to her usual impassive look. "We were told *many* things about you, Christina. The young lady who just left told us that you are our grandson Walt's fraternal twin, spirited away at birth. That the people that raised you called you Walt and raised you like a boy, and are the same people that abducted him."

"Oh." the girl looked at her lap. "Yeah. All *that*."

"It's much the same story my daughter told me." Virginia sighed as her husband returned to join them. "Walter? Would you be a dear and get us some tea?"

"Of course, love!" the man smiled before heading into the kitchen.

Alone once more, Virginia wryly grinned at the sad girl seated next to her. Reaching out, she lifted Christina's chin until she was once more looking in her eyes. "I am, however, *not* a stupid, nor unobservant, woman... *Walt*."

Swallowing hard and unsure how to take that, Christina looked at her face. "Um... that... that's what the people that raised me called me. My name's *Christina*, though. I... I *always* knew I was a girl!"

"*I know*." she stated emphatically. "I *saw* it in you at your sixth birthday. The look in your eyes each time you opened a present meant for a boy spoke *volumes*! I see that same look in *your* eyes, *Christina*." Looking away, the woman sighed. "I was the one to tell your mother of your *problem*. It's the reason she spent six years with not much more than a phone call on holidays. She... she didn't *want* to hear what she needed to do about it."

Stunned, Christina got her thousand-yard stare again. "So... you *knew* I was a girl inside... and you know that I used to be *Walt*?"

"I know what my eyes and ears *tell* me." Virginia answered. "Since the first moment I heard your story, I was suspicious. My daughter would not have kept the fact of a stillborn daughter from me back then. Add to that the fact that you were naturally effeminate as a child, the way you move, speak, and the expressions on your face, and I see my grandson in you. I do not pretend to know *how*, but I still *know*."

Taking a breath, Christina laid it all out.

Listening intently, Virginia took it all in with equanimity and aplomb. When Walter returned with the tea, just after Christina had finished and before she could respond, she smiled up at her husband of forty-three years. "Walter, dear? Would you show... *Christina*... to her room? I... I need a moment."

In all their years together, the man had rarely seen his wife unsettled about *anything*, and he knew her well enough to see it when others couldn't. The last time had been the day their daughter and their family had left to return to Phoenix, Ruth saying that it would be better if the two families kept their distance from then on. "OK, love." he replied calmly. Extending a hand to his granddaughter, Walter smiled. "Come *on*, Christina! Let me show you where you'll be *staying*!"

Led down a short hallway, she was escorted into a room that took her breath away. Everywhere she looked said, 'this is a girl's bedroom', from the white and pink canopy bed to the wooden dollhouse in the corner. It was a little juvenile for an almost twelve-year-old, but to her it was all the things she'd ever wanted. Everywhere she looked she saw things she'd craved growing up. "Is... is all this for *me*?" she asked in wonder.

"Well, Grandma Robbins is a *little* too mature for it anymore, sweetie!" he laughed. "It's not too 'little girl' for you though, is it? We know you're almost a *teenager*."

Seeing her begin to explore the room, he stood back and happily relived his daughter's childhood in his mind. The hours spent playing tea party with her dolls, her smile when he would come home from work that rejuvenated his worn soul, and the extreme pride at seeing her excel in school. A tear escaped his eye, which he surreptitiously wiped away.

Learning where everything was, and how much her grandparents were intent on spoiling her, Christina was in shock. When she opened the closet, she saw

enough clothes to provide a whole dorm full of girls with several outfits each. Turning to the dresser, she was about to open a drawer when it reminded her of Kathy. Stepping away, she returned to her guardian. "Thank you, Grandpa Robbins." she stated politely. "You really didn't have to get me so *much*."

Smiling down at her, he petted her head. "If we'd have had you around your whole life, we would have gotten you this much and more, just for birthdays and Christmases, sweetie!" he excused the extravagance. "Honestly, I think we got off *easy*!" he laughed.

Giggling at his joke, she hugged his waist. "Thank you just the same!" she nearly cried. After a moment, she stepped back. "May I have a moment alone, Grandpa Robbins? I... I want to change."

"Of *course*!" he grinned, grabbing the doorknob. "We'll be out in the living room!" At that he stepped out, pulling the door closed behind him.

Almost running to her bed, she practically skidded to her knees as she closed her eyes and clasped her hands together. *God? It's Christina again! This is so amazing! Grandpa and Grandma Robbins are giving me everything I ever wanted! I have an actual girl's bedroom! With clothes and everything! I know you know all that, but I just wanted to say thank you! I know they're the ones that got it all, but you made me a girl, so I owe it to you first!*

It was so hard for so long, I thought I'd never be able to take it! The only problem now is that I can't share my happiness with Mother and Daddy... or Kathy and the Grants. I miss them so much! I'd be happy to give up all this to be able to go home! If you can help with that, I'd really appreciate it! Of course if you can't, that's OK. I'll understand.

Oh! Before I forget, I was wondering if you can do something to help Dawn. She's all alone now! She needs your help way more than I do! So if you can only help one of us, help her instead. Please?

Anyway, I just needed to say thank you! You didn't have to make me a girl, and I know that for a while I wanted you to undo it, but I think you know what's best for me, and you wouldn't have done it if you didn't think it was a good idea. So... thank you. Thank you for making me a girl. Not just a month ago, but for making me always be a girl! I love you! Amen!

Getting up off her knees, the girl looked at the bags on her bed, then at the dresser and closet. Giggling happily, she ran to her new things and started to change.

Coming out of Christina's room, Walter made a beeline to his wife. Seeing her still sitting on the couch, he slowly approached her. "*Love? What's the matter?*"

Gathering her wits that had been completely shattered by the fantastic tale her granddaughter had told her with utter conviction, Virginia tried to reassert her stoic attitude. "It... it's *nothing*, Walter. Just... just *having* her here, and knowing what's *happened* to her, and what *could* have happened if that horrid Ms. Boyd had her way is... *unsettling*."

"*I know*." he agreed as he sat next to her. Picking up her untouched tea, he offered it to her. "*Here*. Drink this and you'll feel a little more yourself."

Taking a sip, Virginia felt somewhat better. It was *normal* and *predictable*. "Walter? How *strong* is your faith? I mean, how *strongly* do you believe in the things we were taught as children about God?"

Taken aback at her question that seemed to come from out of nowhere, her husband had to think for a moment how to answer. "Well, I guess I'd have to say that I believe *something* lies beyond this world. I don't know what it *is*, or how closely it matches with what I was *taught*, but in the end it doesn't *matter*. We'll *all* find out sooner or *later*!" he finished with a smile.

"Walter?" she began as she put down her tea. "I want to *tell* you something."

Lyle knocked on the door, hesitating only a moment. Waiting impatiently, he rocked on his heels until the door opened.

David wasn't expecting anyone. When he opened the door and saw the FBI agent in charge of the case of his missing 'son', he was momentarily stunned. "Lyle! Um... come *in*! Please! Is there anything new?"

Entering quickly, his brow furrowed. "No. Nothing new." Stopping and standing in the living room, he looked around and saw they were alone. "Ruth still at work?"

With a quick nod, David gestured to the couch. "Please! Sit! Can I get you anything? A drink? Lemonade? Coffee? *Scotch*?"

Chuckling as he sat, Lyle shook his head. "No... no thanks, Dave."

"So what brings you by?" David asked sitting in a chair across from him.

"My *gut*." he answered cryptically. "See, it's rarely *wrong*." Telling the man about how his gut instinct had not only led to the arrest of Nancy Boyd, but five others involved in a child sex trafficking ring being run out of the foster home in Tucson where Christina had nearly been sent, he paused only to be interrupted.

"Oh my *God*!" David exclaimed. "That... that was where she was going to send *Christina*! She almost..."

"But she *wasn't* sent there, Dave!" Lyle reassured the man. "And the attempt to do so stopped a *lot* of kids from being hurt even *more*. It's a *good* thing, Dave! You helped save *them* and every kid that could have ended up there *after* her! So... *thank* you!"

Sighing heavily, he looked over at Lyle. "So... is that what you wanted?"

"No." he admitted as he stood and paced the living room. "See, I just can't shake the feeling that there's *something* about this case that you know that you haven't *told* me... haven't told *anyone*! My gut is *screaming* it at me, Dave! What *is* it? I *don't* think you're involved! *Believe* me! If you *are*, I might as well hang up my gun and badge *now*... less than eight years from retirement! I can't be an agent and be *that* bad a judge of character!"

Looking away, David tried to parse his answer carefully. "Look, Lyle. If I knew *anything* that could help get my child back home, don't you think I'd *tell* you?"

"*See?*" Lyle almost shouted. "*That* right *there*! You're being hyper-*selective* about what *words* you choose! 'my child'! Why don't you say 'my *son*'? It's *more* than that, though! You're not the only one *doing* things like that! Ruth does it, *too*! I had that letter from Christina analyzed by a writing expert? He pointed out the *same thing* in *her* word choices! Tell me the *truth*! Did you *coach* Christina on what to put in that letter?"

"*No!*" David truthfully denied. "Of *course* I didn't! She wrote that all on her *own*! We *told* you that!"

"*I know!*" he stormed around the room frustratedly. "She did it in interviews, *too*! It was always, 'the people that raised me' or 'the place I grew up'! It's like she's always dancing *around* something! You *all* are! What *is* it, Dave? What aren't you *telling* me? What are you all *hiding*?" Looking at him, Lyle shook his head. "*Please* tell me you didn't sell your *daughter*, Dave!"

Incensed, David stood and confronted the agent. "Of *course* I didn't! I would *never* do something like that, *Agent Stewart*! Is this an *official* interrogation? Do I need a *lawyer*?"

"*No!*" Lyle turned away. "I... I'm not even on *duty* right now! My supervisor won't *let* me put any more time on it unless we get a fresh lead!"

"So what's this all *about*, then?"

Turning back around, Lyle looked David in the eye. "It's about my *gut* telling me that you *know* something and I can't let it go until you *tell* me, Dave! *Come on*, man! *Trust* me! What *is* it? Is it thinking Christina was *dead* all these years, only to learn she wasn't? Did you *suspect* Dr. Young of stealing her, but because he died you didn't press the issue? *What?*"

Blowing out a breath slowly to calm down, David shook his head and looked away. "It's *nuts*, Lyle. You'd never *believe* it! You'd think we're *all* nuts, and you might not be *wrong*! *I* think it's nuts and I'm a *part* of it!" Turning back to the agent, he smiled. "Wanna beer? *Trust* me, when I *tell* you this, you're gonna *need* it!"

Lyle thought a moment before nodding. "OK. Sure." Watching the man get two beers out of the fridge, he took the offered bottle and took a drink as he sat back down. "OK, so what's so totally nuts that you won't even *tell* me?"

Sitting back down, David took a drink. "You a *faithful* man, Lyle? I mean, do you believe in God?"

The agent raised a brow, not having expected that question. "Well, I was raised Catholic. I don't get to *church* much anymore, though. *Why?*"

"*Catholic!*" David smiled in surprise. "That may actually *help*! You already believe in *miracles*."

Shifting uncomfortably, Lyle shook his head. "I wouldn't go *that* far, Dave. I mean, I'm a *rational* man! Everything has a *cause*! Maybe we don't know what it *is*, but it's there *somewhere*!"

"OK, so what besides a miracle could make my *son* turn into my *daughter*?"

Chapter 12 - Final Judgement

As Christina walked into the courtroom, she was nervous. Living with her grandparents these last five days had been both wonderful and heartbreaking. That first day they'd been loving toward her, but after her grandmother knew the truth of who she was and told Walter, she'd lost all hope of acceptance.

Christina walked out of her bedroom wearing one of the dresses they had bought for her. The shy smile she wore slowly fell the closer she got as she approached the two still sitting on the couch.

"It's true Walter!" Virginia insisted. "She's Walt! I know it! What's more, she knows it, and I think our daughter does, too!"

Clearing her throat, Christina watched the two turn to her. "Um... I wanted to thank you for all the things you got for me. You... you didn't have to do that." Turning in place, she showed off her dress. "W... what do you think?"

Virginia knew that she'd overheard them. "It looks very nice... Walt. Wouldn't it be better if we got you some boy clothes?"

Gulping, Christina looked at the floor. "You just want Walt back now that you know. I'll go change into pants for you so I won't make you upset. I'm sorry." At that, the girl headed back into her room and changed back into her donation clothes; her grandparents unable to say anything to stop her.

Today though, she wore her best dress. Her lawyer had told her grandparents that it would make a good impression and help ensure that Christina stayed in their custody, and under the 'protection' of DCS, for the next six years.

Following her grandparents, she sat in the gallery as others assembled. When her parents came in, it took all her willpower to not jump up and run to them. Seeing her father wink and smile at her gave her badly needed hope. When she saw Ruth though, her heart sank. Her mother looked like a broken toy,

walking into the court vacantly and without any sense of feeling from her. She didn't even look over at her. *I'm never gonna see them or Kathy ever again!* she told herself. *This is my punishment for wanting to be a girl! I have to watch everyone that I care about get hurt because of my stupid wish!*

"Call the next case." Judge Marcus Fallon stated clearly.

"Cocoran versus Arizona Department of Child Safety, your honor." the court clerk told him. "*Custody* case."

"Counsels may approach the bench." he sighed, hating these sort of cases. In light of recent news stories, he knew the public would be watching. "So what's the *story* here, counselor?" he asked Kyle Smith, the DCS counsel.

"Complex, but it boils down to the fact that the Cocorans want custody of their daughter, your honor. She is presently in DCS custody following a child abduction case where she was recovered. The state contends that they aren't fit parents on the grounds that they sold her at birth. We would like to move for dismissal, your honor."

"Very well." he sighed, glad that he could clear the docket quickly and avoid the publicity. "Unless counsel for defense has objection..."

"*I do*, your honor." Lisa Everett spoke up. "The charges against my clients for *allegedly* selling their child at birth were dropped by the DA for lack of evidence. They have no criminal history and are well-established members of the community, your honor." Handing him a brief showing the disposition of the allegations, she waited patiently.

Glancing at the brief, Judge Fallon sighed. "Very well. Motion to dismiss is denied. You may proceed." he directed at the Cocoran's lawyer.

"Thank you, your honor." Lisa smiled as she returned to her desk. "The case here is not as complex as the opposing counsel indicated. On July twenty-

second, two-thousand-five, Christina and Walter Cocoran were born to Ruth and David Cocoran; fraternal twins. Their doctor, one Fredrick Young, told the Cocorans at the time that Christina was stillborn."

"Objection, your honor!" Kyle interrupted. "That's pure hearsay. No Fetal Death Certificate was ever filed by Dr. Young, your honor. The plaintiffs have no proof that he told them *anything*."

"Your honor, if I may be allowed to proceed, I *can* offer evidence." Lisa stated calmly. "I offer into evidence the following FBI investigation report. It shows that Dr. Young had in his possession at time of death a substantial amount of cash in his home. It was the finding of the FBI that Dr. Young had abducted Christina Cocoran, sold her on the black market, and died before he could submit falsified birth or death certificates. The FBI agents who prepared the report *are* considered experts in this area and I can call them as witnesses to support that conclusion, your honor."

"Objection overruled." he gaveled after skimming the report. "Proceed."

"Thank you, your honor. As I was saying, after being told by Dr. Young that their daughter was stillborn, the Cocorans took their son Walter home and raised him, believing that he was their only living child. Then sometime during the night of May second of this year, Walter Cocoran was abducted from his home by the same people who had purchased Christina Cocoran from Dr. Young."

"Objection!" Kent almost shouted. "Counsel for the plaintiffs is spinning a *story* here, your honor! *None* of this has been substantiated! The facts are that on the date in question, Walter Cocoran went *missing* from his home! No evidence has surfaced to show abduction, your honor!"

"Your honor, I submit *this* FBI report, in addition to the Police report taken by Officer Raul Martinez, showing that my clients reported the abduction *immediately* on discovery." Handing him the papers, she stepped back.

Glancing at the two reports, Judge Fallon nodded. "Overruled. Continue."

"Thank you, your honor. The key to this abduction and knowing it was done by the same people who'd paid Dr. Young for Christina Cocoran is that the fact that the child in question, *Christina Cocoran*, was *left* in the Cocoran home *after* abducting her twin brother."

Looking up from the papers he was skimming, Judge Fallon interrupted. "They gave her *back*? After more than eleven *years*?"

"Yes, your honor." Lisa nodded to him. "On waking and finding Christina in their home, and believing her to be an unrelated person, they turned her over to Phoenix PD. She was then taken to the nearest hospital with a mild concussion."

"How was the injury received?" the judge inquired.

"The police report shows that the injury was received when Christina fell out of her brother's bed, your honor. She was trying to tell my clients that she was their daughter, but they were understandably skeptical, believing her to have not survived birth. She became agitated and fell."

"Objection!" Kyle shouted again. "The police report only *alleges* that this was the case. DCS contends that the injury may have occurred by abuse of the child, your honor! This can be substantiated by her history of violence!"

"How can the child have a history of violence if she's only been recovered for a *month*, counselor?" Judge Fallon probed.

Pulling out his own reports, Kyle handed them to the judge. "The child in question assaulted the attending physician, one Dr. Ramsey, in front of two police witnesses, as well as the attending nurse. Later, in DCS placement, the child assaulted a fellow foster child without provocation. This *clearly*

establishes that the child has severe emotional trauma and needs to be kept in DCS protection, as well as casting *serious* doubts as to how her injury was sustained. Considering that it was the plaintiffs who are the only witnesses to this alleged 'fall', it's *inadmissible!*"

"Your honor!" Lisa insisted. "The police report shows that Christina *herself* admitted to the attending nurse that the injury was a result of a fall! Further, the medical exam conducted at the time showed *no* signs of abuse! Counsel for DCS is making unsubstantiated allegations without evidence or charge!"

"Abuse victims *commonly* go along with whatever story their parents *tell* them to say, your honor!" Kyle countered. "It would require an expert to say if the child was coached or not. We move for postponement to allow time for the child to be examined by a competent authority to determine the *truth.*"

Reading that part of the police report carefully, Judge Fallon grimaced. "This report shows that a licensed physician, two police officers, a registered nurse, and two EMTs all agree that the injury was a result of a simple fall with no signs of abuse in evidence. Objection overruled. Proceed, counsel."

"Thank you, your honor!" Lisa sighed in relief. "On follow-up investigation, the lead agent of the FBI team looking into Walter Cocoran's abduction, one Lyle Stewart, found evidence substantiating Christina's claim that she was in fact their daughter. While hospitalized, a DNA sample was taken from Christina. This was compared to the DNA of the Cocorans, provided voluntarily by them in the course of the investigation."

Handing him the DNA results, Lisa stepped back again. "The report shows that she is in fact, the daughter of Ruth and David Cocoran, your honor. Once presented with this evidence, my clients were immediately concerned that she be returned to their custody. Acting on the advice of the lead agent in charge of their *son's* case, they allowed DCS to take custody, with the expectation that she would be returned to them in due course. DCS has thus far failed to

even allow reasonable *visitation*. In the last month, my clients have only been allowed *one* visit with their daughter."

"*Objection*, your honor." Kyle stated a little less enthusiastically. "The child in question was undergoing therapeutic observation with a DCS authorized representative following the unprovoked assault on another foster child! Acting on behalf of the child's best interest takes precedence over parental visitation rights!"

"Your honor, counsel for DCS has refused to provide the credentials for their representative! This is a violation of my clients' rights to *all* material relevant to their child's care! Failing to provide this won't allow my clients to review their qualifications and may include impeachable evidence!"

Looking at the counsel for Christina, Judge Fallon noticed she had not said a word since the hearing began. "Does counsel for the child have anything to add?"

Janice Taylor looked up from her notes. "Not at this time, your honor. My client substantiates the facts as presented by counsel for DCS."

"Very well. *Objection* sustained. Counsel will refrain from impugning the Department of Child Safety by alleging unfounded failure to provide reasonable visitation. Move on, counsel."

"Yes, your honor." Lisa sighed. "Your honor, this case boils down to the simple fact that my clients, having only just found out that their daughter was alive after nearly twelve years, allowed DCS to take custody on the presumption that she would be returned to their custody once her identity could be established in fact. Counsel for DCS has not made *any* objection to the fact that Christina is in fact my clients' daughter. They have gone so far as to place her in a kinship home with Ruth Cocoran's parents on that assumption! No charges are pending against my clients alleging they abused or neglected her. There is simply no *reason* not to return her to their custody!"

That is the basis of the petition as filed, your honor. My clients move to have their parental rights reinstated and to have Christina reunited with them as soon as practical." At that, Lisa took her seat.

Turning to the DCS representative, Judge Fallon pursed his lips. "Counsel has made a motion to have their parental rights reinstated. Does counsel for DCS or for the child object?"

"Yes your honor." Janice finally spoke up. "My client is happy in the home she is in, her guardians are financially secure, she's healthy, the home is safe and secure, and we see no reason for a change in custody at this time."

Kyle stood, clearing his throat. "Counsel for DCS *also* objects, your honor. Counsel for the Cocorans is asking us to reinstate parental rights. That's quite *impossible* when they never had parental rights to *begin* with. Since there is no record of live birth for the child, and thus no registered proof that they are in fact her parents, DCS cannot reinstate rights that weren't taken from them in the first place. DCS moves to make Christina Cocoran a ward of the state until such time as she reaches the age of majority."

Lisa stood up to refute his claim. "Your honor, my clients *are* established as the biological parents of Christina Cocoran. DCS has already stipulated as such in their own records!" Handing a brief to the judge she continued. "This brief shows that on May thirtieth of this year, DCS filed a report to the District Attorney alleging that my clients engaged in human trafficking by selling their daughter to another family. The very *basis* of that allegation begins with establishing that my clients are in fact Christina's parents."

Judge Fallon read the brief quickly. "Agreed, counsel. Mr. Smith? You're already on very shaky ground here. Trying to play both sides of the question by claiming that the child both *is* and *isn't* the child of Mr. and Mrs. Cocoran is wasting this court's time. Motion denied. As for your motion, Miss Everett, I'm afraid I can't grant it, at this time. Counsel for the child has indicated that she does not wish to reunite at this time. If you wish, you may call

character witnesses on their behalf, or impeachable witnesses against the current guardians. The court will consider their testimony before making a final ruling."

"Yes, your honor. I would like to call Christina Cocoran."

"Objection, your honor!" Kyle stood up. "The child is violent, mentally unstable, and should be considered an unreliable witness until such time as her mental state improves with therapy! By the plaintiff's own admission, Christina Cocoran was abducted from her parents and raised by her captors. She has had insufficient time to *cope* with these traumas and needs intensive therapy before her testimony can even be *considered*! Counsel for the child has *already* indicated that her client does not *wish* to be reunited with her birth parents and is *happy, healthy, and safe* where she is!"

"Your honor, it has not been established in *fact* that Christina is needlessly violent or mentally unstable. I have here a transcript of the recording made at the hospital on the date of her examination where counsel for DCS states she struck her attending physician. It shows that Christina reacted to Dr. Ramsey attempting to begin a *pelvic* exam without her consent. Your honor, if *that* isn't just cause to slap a man, then self-defense as a legal defense must be called into question as *well*."

"Further, it is my clients' contention that Christina's *wishes* in this matter have not been considered by either counsel for DCS or even her *own* counsel. It is entirely possible that counsel for the child has misinterpreted her client's wishes. We would like that clarified for the record. If Christina sustains her counsel's statement, my clients will withdraw their petition."

"Your *honor*!" Kyle raised his voice. "You *cannot* allow the child to testify against her own best interests! The child cannot be *allowed* to testify!"

Seeing a way that the hearing could be brought to a quick end, Judge Fallon nodded. "Very well. Objection overruled. The witness will take the stand."

Swallowing hard, Christina stood up and walked toward the bench. Passing her parents, she smiled at them briefly before resuming her walk to the witness stand.

Turning to her, Judge Fallon smiled. "Hello, Christina! I'm Judge Fallon. Now, this isn't a *trial*. It's just a hearing to determine where it's best for you to live. Do you understand?"

Nodding quickly, Christina managed to stammer, "Y... yes, your honor, sir."

"Do you know the difference between telling the truth and making up a story, Christina?" he probed.

"Yes, sir." she replied quietly. "I always tell the truth. The people that raised me told me that lying was a sin. I want to be a *good* girl, so I *never* lie. Not on *purpose*, anyway!"

Nodding, he turned to the Cocoran's lawyer. "You may proceed, counsel."

Stepping up to her, Lisa smiled. "Hi, Christina! I just have one question for you. If *you* could chose, where would *you* want to live?"

Looking at the judge, Christina cleared her throat that was threatening to close with fear. "Um... well, if it was up to *me*, I'd live with my *parents*. It's always better when a kid lives with their *parents*, right?"

"Not *always*, Christina." Judge Fallon answered. "Sometimes parents are mean to their kids and it's our job to make sure they never get hurt again. That's why this court *exists*."

"No further questions, your honor!" Lisa beamed and returned to her seat.

"Counsel for the child?" Judge Fallon offered.

"Um... no questions, your honor." Janice stated nervously. At first sure that siding with DCS was the safe way to get a winning case, she was beginning to see the wind blowing the other way. "Permission to recall this witness at a later time, your honor?"

"Granted. Counsel for DCS?"

Stepping up to Christina, Kyle smiled at her with a grin that didn't reach his eyes. "Christina! You just said that the people that raised you told you that lying was a *sin*, right? That would be the same people that took you away from your parents, right? Now these people told you that your name was Walt and that you were a *boy*, right? Well, if that happened to *me*, I know I wouldn't do *anything* they told me after that! So, you aren't telling us the *truth* when you say you want to live with your parents, are you?"

"Objection, your honor!" Lisa shouted. "Counsel for DCS is badgering the witness! Counsel asked, by *my* count, *four* questions without giving the witness a chance to respond, and the final question impugns the witness's honesty!"

"Objection sustained. Rephrase, counselor."

"Your honor, this witness is a victim of a lifetime of mental abuse!" Kyle contended. "The witness won't answer honestly, because the witness *doesn't* know *fantasy* from *reality*! Just over a *month* ago, the witness believed that she was a *boy*, that the people who raised her *loved* and *wanted* her, and that they were her *birth* parents! Since then, the witness has not only learned they never *were* her parents, but that she was in fact a *girl*! Having her *whole world* turned upside down, she's since had violent episodes, escaped police custody, evaded pursuit like an expert, and shown nothing but *contempt* for the law! Your *honor*! *End* this! *Dismiss* this witness *and* her testimony!"

"I knew I was a girl." Christina mumbled.

About to reply to the DCS lawyer, Judge Fallon heard her and stopped himself. "What was that, young lady?"

"Your *honor!*" Kyle interrupted. "The witness was not asked a *question* by counsel! Her statements are *inadmissible!*"

"Mr. Smith!" Judge Fallon barked. "You are dangerously close to contempt of *court!* Step *back,* counselor!" Turning to Christina again, he lowered his voice. "Now, what *was* it you said, Miss?"

Gathering her courage, Christina raised her chin, sat up straight, and spoke clearly. "I said that I always knew I was a girl, your honor. *He* said that I used to think I was a *boy.* That's not *true!* They *called* me a boy, but I *always* knew that I was a girl!" Turning to face Ruth, she smiled. "Just like Mother."

"Your honor?" Kyle tried once more to make his point. "All of this is entirely irrelevant, except to show that DCS has made its case. The combative and hostile behavior of the witness *proves* that the child needs to stay in DCS protective custody. No questions, your honor." Heading back to his seat, his smug smile made Ruth want to slap him.

"The witness is excused." Judge Fallon stated. "You can go back to your grandparents, Christina!"

Looking at him plaintively, Christina gulped. "*Please!* Just let me go home to Mother and Daddy!" At that she got up and returned to her grandparents.

"Your honor, move to strike." Kyle stated quickly. "Witness's statement was made after being dismissed and not in answer to a question asked by any counsel!"

"Objection, your honor!" Lisa stood up. "The testimony *was* asked for by counsel for the plaintiffs! Witness was simply restating their answer!"

"Overruled." the judge sighed. "All comments made by the witness after being dismissed will be stricken from the record. Call your next witness, counsel."

Spending the next hour calling Agent Stewart, Linda, George, and several other character witnesses, all testifying that David and Ruth were good and loving parents, and after calling both Ruth and David to the stand, Lisa sat back down. "No further witnesses, your honor." The most damaging cross-examination came when Agent Kent took the stand and Kyle made him admit that his walking cast was due to Christina stomping on his instep.

"Counsel for DCS? Do you have any witnesses to call?" Judge Fallon asked.

"Yes, your honor. We call Charlene Dawson, the child's DCS caseworker."

Taking the stand, Charlene was torn. It had been made clear to her that her supervisor wanted Christina to stay in the system, no matter what. He even alluded to the idea that she might 'be creative' when it came to making any notes about the Cocorans, and that her job was on the line. At the same time her conscience was screaming at her that keeping the girl away from her parents was wrong. Consequently, she was nervous as she sat down.

"Ms. Dawson, have you had occasion to record bouts of violence from the child in question?" Kyle inquired.

"Yes, I have." she stated meekly.

"Can you elaborate?" he pressed.

"Um... well, a few weeks ago, she assaulted another foster child staying in her foster home."

"What exactly did she *do*, Ms. Dawson?" Kyle insisted.

"Um... she... uh... she kicked him in the *privates*." she stated embarrassedly.

"I *see*." Kyle smirked. "Ms. Dawson? How does the child seem in her current home? Is she *happy* there? Well *cared* for? In fact, doesn't she have anything a young girl could *want* there? Clothes? Toys? Loving and protective family members?"

"*Objection*, your honor!" Lisa stood up. "Counsel is leading the witness!"

"Sustained." Judge Fallon growled. "*Watch* it, counselor! Restate."

"Yes, your honor. Ms. Dawson? Tell the court how the child is in her current home environment."

Thinking a moment, Charlene sat up. "Christina's healthy, well cared for, provided for, and does have a loving family taking care of her. However..."

"Thank you!" Kyle interrupted her as he headed back to his seat. "That will be all. No further questions."

Lisa jumped on the unfinished testimony. "Ms. Dawson, what were you about to say in your last testimony before counsel for DCS cut you off?"

"Objection! Counsel is *fishing*, your honor! Let her ask her *own* questions!"

"Sustained. Ask *your* questions, counsel."

"Ms. Dawson? How does *Christina* seem in her current home?"

"*Objection!* Asked and *answered*, your honor!" Kyle snapped.

"I'll *allow* it, counselor. The witness is directed to answer."

More nervous, Charlene coughed and fidgeted. "Um... like I *said*, she's well cared for, the home is clean and well-kept, she has all the things she needs, and her grandparents obviously love her very much."

"Your honor, the witness isn't answering the *question*. I asked how *Christina* seems in her current home, not about the home itself or the *other* people in the home." Lisa pointed out.

"The witness is directed to answer the question *asked*." he agreed.

"Um... well, she seems... unhappy." Charlene admitted.

"Is there any indication of why Christina, in a clean, safe, well-provided-for home with loving family in it, could be *unhappy*?" Lisa probed.

"Yes. She... um... she misses her parents. This is a *normal* reaction that will *fade* in time as the bonds are broken and *new, healthy* bonds are formed." she quoted the DCS manual.

"What *bonds*, Ms. Dawson?" Lisa attacked her point. "Christina's only spent a few *hours* with her parents since *birth*! How could she *possibly* be suffering from broken bonds with people she hardly *knows*?"

Unsure how to answer, Charlene looked at the DCS lawyer. "Um... well, she may be suffering from a form of attachment disorder. Since discovering that the people she *thought* were her parents actually *weren't*, she may be making inappropriate attachments to Mr. and Mrs. Cocoran."

"Inappropriate attachments to her *parents*, Ms. Dawson?" Lisa argued. "Are you referring to some sort of *sexual* attachment?"

"*No!*" Charlene insisted.

"Some sort of Reactive Attachment Disorder, then?"

"No, this is actually the *opposite* of that. RAD presents as a *lack* of need to be close to one's caregiver, which is the normal behavior. Christina seems abnormally *attached* to people she barely knows!"

"It's *abnormal* to seek affection from your birth parents." Lisa challenged. "Isn't it an established *fact* that many adults who find they were adopted seek out and form attachments with their birth parents, Ms. Dawson? Isn't that in fact what you *yourself* did on reaching the age of eighteen when you were informed that you were adopted?"

Sweating, Charlene nodded. "Y... yes. I did. But I was an *adult*! Christina can't make that determination at her age! We need to keep her in the system... I mean... we need to do what's in her best interest and keep her *protected* in DCS until she reaches the age of majority! *Then* if she wishes to seek out her birth parents she should be free to do so!"

"Your honor, the witness is obviously unreliable." Lisa turned to the judge. "For whatever reason, she seems to think that DCS *has* to keep *all* children placed in their care for *any* reason! No one has abused or neglected Christina, your honor. *Yes*, she was *abducted*, but by all accounts her abductors were kind, affectionate, caring, and even *loving*! No abuse of any *kind* has been in fact established! What are the grounds for terminating my clients' parental rights? I move for summary judgement, your honor."

"Objection, your honor!" Kyle spoke up. "The child in question was made to live as a *boy* for eleven years! If that isn't *abuse*, I don't know what *is*!"

"Your honor, counsel for DCS is attempting to cloud the issue! Christina is not a case study in transgender legal precedent! It hasn't been *established* that *denial* of transgender care to children, nor guardians choosing to *support* their transgender children can be classed as abuse! The question is at *best* controversial and subjective. Similarly, having a girl wear boy's clothes or giving a boy a feminine name haven't *ever* been considered abuse!"

Judge Fallon looked at Lisa a moment. "The 'boy named Sue' defense? *Seriously*, counsel?"

"Your honor, the counsel for DCS is alleging that Christina was abused by her original caregivers, and that this abuse is the cause of Christina's desire to be with her *family*." Lisa argued. "It's *directly* relevant!"

Considering the arguments a moment, Judge Fallon turned to Charlene. "Ms. Dawson, are you prepared to state as a matter of court record that Christina Cocoran is suffering some sort of attachment disorder?"

Looking at the judge, Charlene was near to hysterical. "Um... well, it... it's just a *theory*, really! I... I'm not a psychologist, your honor! C... Christina does exhibit signs of depression, likely the cause of her attacking the Beck boy. She... um... she needs DCS protection! She needs *therapy* and to remain in *our* custody! Otherwise I might lose... um... I mean, *she* might lose... um... she might lose..." Stymied for how to correct her *faux pas*, Charlene broke down and simply looked at the floor.

"No further questions, your honor." Lisa stated calmly. "Move to have the witness's testimony stricken."

"Objection!" Kyle stood up quickly. "The witness is the DCS representative in this case, your honor! If her testimony is stricken, we'll be forced to request a continuance pending assignment of a new caseworker!"

"Overruled, counselor. The witness's statements are to be stricken from the record, and counsel for DCS's motion for continuance is similarly denied. The witness may step down. Call your next witness, counselor."

Sitting down heavily, Kyle shook his head. "No further witnesses, your honor."

"Very well. Does counsel for the child wish to call any witnesses?"

"Yes, your honor. We would like to recall Christina Cocoran to the stand." Janice stated calmly. When the girl was once more in the witness box, she approached and smiled at the girl. "Cristina? Do you like living with your grandparents?"

"They're OK, I guess." she sighed. "I mean, they're *nice*. I have my own room and toys. I *love* them because they're my grandparents, but... um..."

"Go on, Christina." she encouraged her.

"Um... they're not Mother and Daddy." she stated simply.

"What do you think of the people that raised you?" she questioned.

"They were nice to me. They loved me." she stated, looking at her parents.

"But they made you dress like a boy. They called you Walt, your brother's name. Why do you say they loved you?"

Shrugging, Christina looked at her. "They took good care of me. We played games, we laughed, we had birthday parties, we watched movies together... it didn't *matter* that they treated me like a boy! I... I *loved* them and they loved *me*!" Hearing her mother begin to cry, Christina felt a tear slip down her own cheek.

"So, where do you want to *go*?" she asked.

"*Home*." Christina cried. "I wanna go home to my *Mommy and Daddy*!"

Chapter 13 - His Plan

After a brief recess, Judge Fallon returned to his bench. "Be seated." he stated wearily. Looking out over the assembled people, he blew out a breath. "This case has been full of esoteric questions. Has Christina been abused by being made to live as a boy, even though she didn't seem to mind much? Did the plaintiffs ever have custody of their child, even with no birth record? Thusly, can parental rights be reinstated, even though they were never legally severed to begin with?"

"All of these questions dance around the central question this court is tasked with answering... where is the best place for Christina to live? She's asserted a desire to live with her birth parents. DCS has made their case for the child to remain in their care and in the custody of her grandparents. This court has to also consider the ramifications of either ruling. If I find for the plaintiffs and award them custody, any issues that arise from that judgement will be the responsibility of this court. However, if I deny the petition and remand custody to her grandparents and DCS, it could very well damage future claims biological parents have on their own children."

Taking a moment, he looked at David and Ruth. "After reviewing all the evidence presented, and after reviewing all relevant case law and precedent, this court awards custody of Christina Cocoran to David and Ruth Cocoran, her birth parents. Furthermore, with no claims of abuse of their abducted child, Walter Devon Cocoran, and no indications that they are *likely* to abuse in the future, this court orders DCS to close its case regarding Christina Joy Cocoran within the next thirty days unless further evidence can be found to substantiate claims of abuse. This court stands adjourned." Slamming the gavel down, he rose and left the room.

Hearing the judge's decision, Ruth Cocoran began to sob tears of utter joy. Wrapping David in a desperate embrace, the two held each other while the court began to clear. After a moment, David felt a tap on his shoulder.

Walter Robbins stood straight and tall, despite his nearly sixty-six years. "Ruth? David? I'd like you to meet *Christina*, your *daughter*." Watching the two drop down on their knees and hug their elated child, he turned to Lisa. "Excellent job, Miss! First-rate representation! My *God*, you're good!"

Blushing slightly, Lisa looked away and began picking up the papers she had spread across her table. "I appreciate that sir, given your record!"

Virginia watched as her daughter hugged Christina and waited patiently while Walter made legal talk with their lawyer. When at last the small family released one another, she cleared her throat to announce her presence.

"*Mother!*" Ruth sighed, wrapping the woman in a tight embrace. "Thank you *so* much for taking care of Christina! If you hadn't *been* there for us, she might have... I mean..."

"Yes. I *know* what might have happened." Virginia stated evenly. Lowering her voice she stepped close. "I just wish it hadn't taken a *miracle* to make us *see* her and who she was *meant* to be!"

Looking at her mother in astonishment, she whispered, "How do *you* know?"

"The same way I knew you were seeing that *Donaldson* boy when you were *fifteen*, dear. A mother *knows!*"

Walking out of the courtroom with Christina in hand, Ruth shook her head. "But... I mean, how did you know..."

"*Later*, dearest." Virginia said below her breath. "When we're not someplace we can be *overheard*."

After stopping at the clerk's office for copies of the order, and presenting a copy to Charlene 'officially', Lisa got a signed release from the caseworker

showing that DCS no longer had any custody over Christina and that Ruth and David were her sole guardians.

"I *hated* fighting this. I didn't have any *choice*. It's required by *regulations*. I... I'll have the case closed later this afternoon." the stricken DCS worker stammered. "I'm afraid if I *don't*, someone might post *new* allegations to your case. Once it's *closed*, allegations would need to be logged as to *who* made them and *when*, and I don't know if I'll be working for DCS *tomorrow*."

"What makes you say *that*?" Ruth asked curiously.

Looking from side to side surreptitiously, Charlene lowered her voice. "I... I was told, in no uncertain terms, that my *job* rode on keeping Christina in the system! See, every child we handle means a *quarter million dollars* in federal revenue to the department! They *never* want a child leaving DCS custody! Since the order is contingent on there being no new evidence, I want to make sure no one *invents* some, just to keep Christina pumping out cash."

Lisa handed the woman her card. "If they fire you over this, *call* me. I think you'd have a pretty good civil suit against the state and county! I'll work on a percentage, so don't worry about my fee!" Turning to David, she grinned. "*You*, on the other hand, will be getting my bill next week after I file to get Christina her delayed birth certificate! She's going to need to go to *school* after the summer break!"

Laughing together, each of them shook Lisa's hand, Christina being last.

Looking up at the woman, Christina grinned. "Thank you *so much*, Miss Everett! You *saved* me!" Hugging her waist, the girl nearly cried with joy.

Hugging the back of her head, Lisa sighed in contentment. "It's the *least* I could do, Christina! Now... why don't you go *home*!" Stepping back, the attorney waved goodbye before turning to walk away.

With that, the five family members left the courthouse for home.

Climbing into her parents' car, Christina reveled in the familiarity of it all. *Home! I get to go home! To stay! As a girl!* Thinking about all the things to come in her life as her parents drove her home, the girl smiled.

Pulling into the driveway, David killed the motor. "We're home, beautiful!"

"Hurray!" she shouted as she practically leapt from the car and ran to her front door. Waiting for her parents to let her in, Christina bounced on the balls of her feet, giddy as a schoolgirl. As soon as the door opened, she ran inside and headed for her room to get her smartphone where she left it the night before her transformation. *I gotta call Kathy and tell her!*

Entering the room made her come to a screeching halt. Her room no longer was the stark and sterile place it had been the last time she was home. Instead her covers and pillowcases had been changed to white ones with little pink hearts, her bed frame was now a shiny gold instead of the wooden frame it had been, her carpet was now a lovely shade of pale violet, lace curtains had replaced her old venetian blinds, and the room smelled faintly of lilacs. Compared to her room at her grandparents, it was more sedate and had fewer things in it, but it still left her awestruck.

Looking around slowly, Christina took it all in. Going over to her closet, she reached out with a trembling hand and opened it. It wasn't like the one she had back at her grandparents' house, packed with pretty clothes, but there were a few nice outfits for her to chose from and even a couple dresses.

"How do you like it?" Ruth said nervously from the doorway. "I... I mean, if you *don't* like something, we can see about changing it."

Turning to her mother, Christina's eyes were wide with astonishment and her tongue was so tied, she couldn't speak.

"I... I've been redecorating a little at a time while you were gone." Ruth explained cautiously. "The clothes should be the right size, but if you don't like the *style* we can return them!" Looking at her daughter, she swallowed hard. "Well? Is it too *much*? *Too girly*? I'm *sorry*, sweetheart! I... I was *really* trying to *listen* to all those things you told me when you were growing..."

"Oh, *Mother!*" Christina cried her own tears of joy. "It... it's *perfect!* It's... it's... *me!* You *do* love me for me! You *did* see me!" Falling into her mother's arms, she continued to sob. "*Thank* you, Mother! Not for the *things*, but for *seeing* me and *loving* me as your *daughter!* It's all I ever *wanted!*"

Hugging and crying together, Ruth had to restrain herself or risk hurting her child. "Of *course* I love you, Christina! I've *always* loved you! Even when we thought you were a boy but acted so feminine, I *still* loved *you!* Don't ever *doubt* it, baby girl!"

Wracked with sobs of relief over fears she dared not even reveal to herself, Christina stayed like that for uncounted minutes until her feelings were once more under control. "Th... that's one of th... the *downsides* of b... being a girl! I... I can't s... seem to s... stop *crying* a l... lot of the t... time!"

Ruth laughed gaily. "Welcome to the *estrogen* club, baby! *Wait* a few years! *I'll* think you've gone *crazy* and *you'll* think I'm an unreasonable *tyrant!*"

Laughing together a moment, Christina looked around the room. "Um... where'd you put my phone, Mother? It's not where I *left* it... charging on my desk. I... um... I wanna call Kathy! I *gotta* tell her I'm finally *home!*"

"Why don't you just tell me in person!" Kathy said with a smile.

Turning toward where the voice had come from, Christina saw her best friend standing in her doorway. Wearing a nice top and pretty knee-length skirt, she looked nervous to Christina's eyes, but immediately she felt the same warm butterflies flitting around her stomach, only this time they were

much more powerful. "*Kathy!*" she breathed out like a song. Unable to even move, she stood in her room awestruck at her own feelings.

Looking from one girl to the other, Ruth took a breath, let it out slowly, and walked to the doorway. "I... I'll let you two have a moment alone to... say hello. We'll be in the living room. Don't be *too* long, sweetheart." At that, she maneuvered around Kathy and left the room.

Slowly stepping into the new bedroom, Kathy swallowed hard. *This is my best friend! My Christina! My Walt! The girl I... love.* Moving up to stand in front of the petrified girl, Kathy leaned in, wrapped her arms around her, and began to cry. "I... I was so afraid I'd never *see* you again, Christina!"

Returning the affectionate embrace, Christina relaxed into the moment. "I was afraid I'd never see *you* again *either!* I mean, according to the 'official story', you and I have never *met!*"

Giggling, Kathy hugged the girl even tighter. "Well, we'll have to *fix* that!" Releasing her, Kathy stepped back and stuck out her hand. "Hi! I'm *Kathy!* I was best friends with Walt! Now that he's *gone*, I think I'm going to have *you* as my best friend from now on!"

The girl giggled with her as she shook Kathy's hand. "Pleased to *meet* you, Kathy! I'm *Christina!* I... I'm sorry Walt went away and made you *sad*. Has anyone ever told you though that you have *gorgeous* hair and eyes?"

Stepping closer, Kathy was overcome. Her heart near to bursting with love and affection for the best friend she ever had, the thought of nearly having lost her forever drove her to do something she thought impossible just a short time ago. Taking Christina's hands in hers, Kathy sighed. "Christina? I... I want to kiss you. Will you let me? It's OK if you say no! I... I know you... you don't feel the same as me... and that's OK! I'd rather *die* than hurt you! But... um... if you wouldn't *mind* so much... I.. um..."

Smiling, Christina stepped even closer. "Kathy? This last month I missed you *so much*! More than I ever thought I could miss *anyone*! More maybe than my own *parents*! I... I don't know what to call what I feel for you, but I don't think I could say no to you if I *wanted* to... so... um... OK!"

Leaning forward, Kathy closed her eyes just as Christina did. When their lips touched for the first time, a hunger swelled in her that frightened her. Pulling back quickly, her eyes snapped open as she saw Christina slowly open hers.

"Um... what happened?" her best friend asked confusedly. "What's wrong?"

Kathy was dumbfounded to express how shocked she was at her own feelings of attraction to the girl she'd known forever. Trying to give them words, she stammered a moment before closing her eyes to focus. "Um... that was... *nice*! *Very nice*! Kinda *scary*, though!" Opening her eyes again, she had to know. "How about *you*?"

Similarly perplexed at how to express herself, Christina bit her lower lip. "I don't know. You're *right*! It *was* nice! Kinda like a *warm* feeling all over! It wasn't *scary* for me though. It made my heart beat and my toes tingle!"

Looking at her arm, Kathy swallowed. "I.. I have *goose-bumps* all over!" Turning to look at Christina, she giggled. "I... I *really* liked that, Christina! A *whole* lot! Can... can we do that *again* sometime?"

Pulling her into a tight hug, Christina reveled in the pleasant warmth and familiarity of her embrace. "Sure! Anytime you *like*, Kathy! I liked it a lot, *too*!" Giggling happily, she stepped back. "Not *today*, though! Everyone's waiting for us!"

Taking Christina's hand, Kathy sighed lovingly. "I love you, Christina!"

"I... I think I love you too, Kathy!" she blushed. "Come on!"

The two came out of the bedroom holding hands and saw all the adults turn and look at Christina. There was one more here than had been when she got home. Somehow, Agent Stewart had joined them.

Kneeling down and looking at Christina carefully, Lyle couldn't reconcile the girl in front of him with the boy in his many reports. Trying to reconcile his faith with the idea that God had made a miracle to make a little boy into a girl seemed even more impossible than the fact itself. Gathering his wits, he asked what he needed to know.

"Christina? Your father told me something I'm having a hard time believing, but it explains all the problems I had with the case of your missing brother. He... he's not *missing*... *is* he?"

Looking at her father, Christina saw him nod. Turning back to the agent that she owed her freedom to, she took a deep breath. "*Sorta*. Except it's not *he*... it's *she*... and I'm not *missing*. I... I never *was*."

Hearing it from her own lips, Lyle nodded. "Alright. *How*?"

Taking him by the hand, she led him to the couch and waited for him to sit next to her. When the other six adults took seats around the room to listen, Christina turned back to look him in the eyes. "Her name's Lisbeth and she's an *angel*."

Half an hour later, the seven adults sat around the kitchen table while Kathy and Christina watched a movie on TV.

"I still have a hard time *believing* it." Lyle shook his head. "It's the only thing that fits all the *facts*, though! No *evidence*, doors *locked*, no *witnesses*!"

"Kathy saw Walt in her right from the start." Linda admitted. "Even though I know an angel saved my life, even *I* have a hard time accepting it!"

Shrugging, her husband George smiled at her. "You weren't *nearly* as pig-headed about it as *I* was, love! It took a *ton* of convincing for me!"

"I didn't *want* to see it." Ruth confessed. "I... I was so scared that she would be *hurt*, I didn't even want to see Christina when she was right in *front* of me, let alone for the last six years around the house with her growing up."

"Nearly *twelve*, dear." David corrected her. "She's *always* been Christina. We just didn't *notice* it until she *made* us see it!" Hanging his head, her husband shook it in shame. "At least you saw it *eventually*. I had to be shown the *DNA* evidence to believe. What kind of a *father* does that make me?"

"A *rational* one." Walter grouched. "I *still* don't know that... Christina... is my namesake! You *say* she is... that the whole story about her being stillborn was made up to explain her to people that won't believe a miracle right in front of their eyes, but it *still* won't gel in my head! I'll *accept* it! I don't have much *choice*, but..."

"When Christina told me her story, I... I *believed* her, but I still wanted *Walt* back." Virginia conceded. "In the short time we had her, I made her feel unwelcome in her own *home*... that she had to be someone she could never *be* in order for me to love her." Looking at her daughter, she sat up straight. "I'm *sorry*, Ruth. I was *wrong*. You were *right*. Suggesting you 'fix' Christina with those Conversion Therapy places was *wrong*! She was *always* meant to be a girl! You were *right* to keep her away from me!"

"It's OK, Mother!" Ruth comforted her. "We *all* made mistakes when it comes to Christina."

Lyle took it all in. "OK. so it seems we have two groups here. Skeptics like Walter, David, and myself... and the rest of you who saw it sooner. I still don't *really* believe what you all are saying. I have to *accept* it because you

tell me that Walt wasn't a twin... and my gut tells me you're not *hiding* anything anymore. That leaves a *problem* hanging, though."

David turned to the man who'd become a good friend to him over the last month. "What problem?"

"Walt." Lyle explained. "The investigation is still open. He's still listed as missing. If anyone starts digging into it, they're *going* to find one glaring discrepancy."

"What's that?" David worried.

"You stopped pushing to find him." Lyle pointed out. "After Christina was brought in, all your efforts shifted to getting her home. You didn't push to find Walt at *all* after that. Taken at face value, an investigator could conclude that you *willingly* gave him up to his abductors in exchange for Christina. I know because I considered it *myself*. I just knew you well enough to not *press* the issue."

Thinking about all that they'd done to get Christina home, David sighed. "We also kind of threw poor Dr. Young under the bus. I'm just glad he never had any family."

"Don't feel *too* bad." Lyle comforted. "Dr. Young was into some shady stuff. He was indicted four times for providing drugs to criminals, but the DAs could never get it to stick. He'd just move to a new area and start again."

"So, what can we do about Walt's case?" Ruth asked. "The only way to close it would be to *find* him, but he's not out there to *find*. She's in the *living* room!" Distraught that all their work might be undone, she began to cry. "Why is all this *happening*? Why is God *punishing* us like this?"

Walter considered the issue silently. After a moment, he stood and walked over behind his daughter, massaging her shoulders gently. "If we accept the

only conclusion possible, that my namesake was a girl all along, and that He turned her body into a girl, then it stands to reason that He had a plan for it all. Let's look at the *facts*. What were all of the ramifications of Walt going missing and Christina being left in his place?"

Sniffing back the tears, Ruth thought hard. "Well, the police and FBI started searching for Walt. That's the *problem!* Now they won't *stop!*"

"OK." he conceded. "What *else?*"

"Well, I got credit for busting a child sex ring." Lyle added.

"Ah!" Walter jumped on the suggestion. "So, because my grandchild and all of us had to go through all this, an untold number of children won't be abused anymore! Not just the ones who were freed from it a few days ago, but all the ones that will never end up there to *begin* with... like my *granddaughter.*" Leaning down next to his daughter, Walter tilted her chin to look at him. "Does *that* make all this *worth* it?"

Nodding, Ruth smiled at him. "Yes, Dad. It *does*, but what do we do *now?*"

Adding his thoughts, David smiled. "Lyle, I once told you that I had to focus all my efforts on getting Christina *home*, right? Can I assume you noted that in our file?" Seeing the agent nod, he resumed his thoughts. "OK, so we have to make efforts to find 'Walt' now that we have Christina back! Since the trail's gone cold, even *small* efforts would be *noticeable*, right? I'll see to it that we send out missing person flyers all over Arizona! It's a small price to pay to not look guilty of something we never *did!*"

"That's a good idea, Dave." Lyle acknowledged. "You might want to add New Mexico, Southern California, Utah, and Southern Nevada. I'll be sure to note in the file that I told you that this was the working radius we had for where Christina had to have been growing up."

While the adults made their plans to see to it that no one would know they'd covered up a miracle, Christina slipped into her room and closed the door. With Kathy waiting for her return, she knelt next to her bed and prayed.

Oh, God! Thank you so much! I was so scared when Ms. Boyd tried to get me sent away to Tucson! All the grownups don't know I know, but I saw the news on the internet! I read what was happening to the kids in that house!

I was afraid that I'd have to stay with Grandpa and Grandma Robbins, which they're nice and all, but sooner or later those DCS people would move me to another home like that one and I'd be lost forever! Miss Everett was so nice! Can you do something nice for her? I mean, just something she would like?

So this all must have been what Lisbeth was talking about! My decision did have consequences, but it all worked out, thanks to a lot of people like Miss Everett and Agent Stewart! So... thank you again! I love you, God! Amen!

As she prayed, she was once more being watched. That night when she went to sleep, Christina found herself one last time in the wildflowers. Looking around, she came face to face with Lisbeth again. "Oh! You... you're *back!*"

Smiling at her, Lisbeth made Christina know her thoughts. *Yes, little one! I don't often come back. The Creator sent me back to tell you that your path is now set in front of you... the one the Creator meant for you all along.*

Approaching her slowly, Christina needed to know. "Um... why did He have to make it so *hard*? I mean, I almost ended up in an *awful* place! Couldn't you have, like, made it so I was *always* a girl, or at least *warn* me?"

Your difficulties were not the Creator's doing. Lisbeth clarified. They were the free decisions of people. As for the rest, if you had always had a female body, you would never have prayed for one, so you wouldn't have gotten one. That is the paradox of wishes people like you often make. I could not even warn you of the dangers, lest it dissuade you from your path. Instead you are

here, events followed the Creator's plan, and you learned what you needed to follow your path. It will be long and difficult, but you will do so much good!

Looking at her curiously, Christina puzzled over the ideas filling her mind. "I... I'm supposed to help kids like *me*? The ones who're taken away from their parents? No... not *just* kids like me *that* way. Kids like I *used* to be that are in the system! Am I *right*? I'm supposed to help kids that're taken away from their parents that are *trans*? *Why*? I mean, how many could there *be*?"

Taking Christina's hand, Lisbeth made her see. With eyes wide, the girl saw that every flower in the field was a child taken from parents who had done nothing wrong, but someone had alleged abuse... *millions* of them. After looking at them in awe, she noticed something. While most of them were yellow, one in seven was pink. Looking at Lisbeth, her voice became soft.

"The... the pink ones are like me and Dawn... *aren't* they?"

Yes. she thought at the girl. *You must help them. That is your path.* Releasing her hand, Lisbeth stepped back.

"But *how*?" Christina whined. "I'm just a *kid*!"

You won't always be. she answered with a smile.

Thinking hard, Christina looked at the flowers. "Oh. So when I grow up, I can help them." Trying to think how she could help, she turned back to the angel with a smile. "*I know!* I could be a lawyer like Grandpa Robbins and Miss Everett! *She* helped *me*, and *I* can help others the way *she* did!"

Whatever you choose, Christina Cocoran, just remember that they're there. Never forget them! They are you!

As the dream faded away, Christina stirred in her bed and settled down. One thing was for certain, she would never forget the field of wildflowers.

A Note from the Author

This story went a very different direction than it started. Originally it was just a counterpoint to all the stories out there that have a TG girl magically transformed into a genetic female, and then everything is all happiness and rainbows, with the whole world changed... all to fit the desires of *one person*.

That leaves a bad taste in this author's mouth. Human free will is *precious*. It's the only thing worth killing and dying for. When authors re-write reality in their stories, and pass it off as a *good* thing, what they're *really* saying is that the thoughts and opinions of people they disagree with are worth a *death* sentence. *Making* someone change their thoughts and memories is effectively *killing* the original person and replacing them with a compliant *drone*, one with no real free will of their own because their *actual* will has been *erased*.

Remember... free will *includes* the ability to make the wrong choices... and people need the liberty to find out for *themselves* that they were wrong.

In writing this story though, I had to determine a way for Christina to end up back with her parents, because I *hate* downer stories. Call it a failing of mine, probably from watching too many Disney movies as a little girl! That meant she had to go *somewhere* while the Cocorans fought to get her back.

I do a *lot* of research for my stories... far more than I think *most* authors do. I look up sunrise and sunset times for locations, phases of the moon, local laws, and a host of other data. In *this* case, I needed to learn all about the Arizona Department of Child Safety... the people that would have custody of Christina in the short-term. What I found was a nightmare that led this story in a different direction that *needed* to be told.

As a retired Statistical Data Analyst, the easiest research for me is statistical. According to the Department of Health and Human Services, approximately 3.2 million children are in custody of various Children's Services agencies in the United States over the course of a year. Of those, less than seven hundred

thousand are classed as having been *provably* abused, physically or sexually, or neglected. The rest are classed as 'non-victims'. A million of those have *some* indication of wrongdoing, but it's not classed as abuse or neglect. That leaves 1.5 million families per year that are accused falsely, but still have their kids taken away. Nearly *half* of all cases.

Of those, over a *hundred thousand* were found to have unfounded allegations that were *proven* false, but the children were *never* returned to their parents. What the data *doesn't* show is how many of those other 2.4 million kids were from families where the allegations were just never *proven* to be false.

Unlike in a *criminal* court, custody cases are a *civil* case. That means the burden of proof is a lot lower, and 'innocent until proven guilty' isn't the case. Cases are decided on 'the preponderance of the evidence'. Parents can have their children taken away from them, *forever*, over the *possibility* that they *might* have done something wrong, and the assumption by a lot of courts is that the parents wouldn't *be* there if they weren't guilty of *something*. Often to get their kids back, parents have to *prove* themselves innocent.

As a mother, that prospect is *terrifying*. How do I *prove* I never neglected my kids? I let them walk to school every morning when they were growing up. Was that neglect? I let them play outside after their homework was done. How can I prove that those things were done to build their self-confidence and not neglectful? How do you prove a negative? The fact is, you *can't*... which is why less than half of kids that are taken from their parents are ever reunited with them. The rest 'graduate' out of the system as adults...

...and the whole time, those departments collect billions of dollars a year in federal revenue. That's a *huge* incentive to keep kids away from their parents... even if they did nothing wrong.

Some places are better than others in this regard. Arizona, until very recent legislation, was one of the *worst*. Child sex rings run out of DCS were broken up, rampant corruption in the system was common, caseworkers perjured

themselves with falsified claims of abuse or claims that foster homes were visited that never were, and all the while innocent families were torn apart.

None of this is disputable. These are actual facts that are in the public record. What makes it all so heartbreaking to me *personally* is the fact that the rate of transgender children in foster care is *fifteen times higher* than the national average. That suggests *intent*. Knowing that the majority of kids are in the system due to false reports, not abuse, it's very unlikely that these are the typical 'parent abuses their TG child' cases. Trans youth are being *targeted*.

In order for all these TG kids in foster care to be abuse victims, they would have to make up over two thirds of all abused kids... which is *highly* unlikely. It's *more* likely that they follow the national average, so only 23% of them are abuse victims (about 93k) and the others are in the system due to false or misleading charges. (about 300k) How many of them are there on trumped-up charges of neglect by family members who disagree with the parents' choice to support their TG children?

Unfortunately, there's no way to know because the system is *designed* to protect itself. Complaints are directed to the same managers of the system that conspire to keep families broken up to keep the federal dollars coming in. Only when the shit really hits the fan and a major news story of corruption or abuse breaks does anyone even pay attention... and even *then* it's short-lived and quietly buried as soon as possible.

In short, this story became a story not just about the realities of 'TG girl gets her wish', but a story of the tragedy of the current CPS system in the US. Millions of families have been torn apart by false accusations, with no real accountability, and many of them are like *me*; *too* many to be coincidence.

This is the same government we're asked to obey *unquestioningly* when it comes to matters of health and safety. With *that* record, why *should* we?

Roberta Elder

About the Author

Writer of four novels that study the human condition from a standpoint of Gender Identity, *Lost Faith*, *Every Day Is Your Last*, her fictionalized autobiography *For God So Loved the World...*, and *The Road to Hell, The Wisher's Paradox* is the first fantastical story in her growing repertoire.

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 Tami in 1999, and meeting her second wife Rachel 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.