

For God So Loved the World...

Little Rachel "Rae" Evans was a happy little girl. Her mother would say that when she laughed, she could make an entire room of people break out in smiles. All that changed when she was four and the laughter stopped. From then on, she withdrew into herself and hid from the world, convinced that *no* one, not even *God*, could ever truly love, or even *understand* her.

Using the author's memory of her life as a template, *For God So Loved the World...* is a fictionalized re-telling of one aspect of her life and how she reconciled her Christian faith with her self-identity. Spanning decades and set in her home state of Northern Nevada, the story tells how a scared and lonely girl learned the most important lessons in life; that each and every one of us, no matter *how* different, has the love of God within them to fulfil their purpose, and that *all* things, good *and* bad, are *necessary* to make us who we are *meant* to become.

This book is dedicated to my wife Tami, who unconditionally loved me for who I am when no one else could even see me. You gave more meaning to my life than I ever thought possible or deserved.

"...the greatest of these is Love."

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124,548 words

This is a work of fiction inspired by the recollections of the author's life. Though based on recalled events, the names, characters, businesses, places, events, locales, and incidents are solely the products of the author's recollections and used in a fictitious manner. Some events have been re-ordered, altered, omitted, or invented for narrative purposes. Any connection or resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing and signed by the author, nor be otherwise circulated in any form other than that in which it is published and without a similar condition including this condition being imposed upon the subsequent publisher.

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Introduction

I've been an avid reader since I was four years old. Absorbing the written word is an *experience* for me. I guess it must be *genetic* because my mother tells a story about her *father*, my *grandfather*, from when she was young that *proves* I get the trait from him. She would see him sitting and reading a book and he would become *so* engrossed in it that she could sneak up behind him, reach inside his vest pocket, and steal his cigarettes right from under his nose and he would never even be aware that it had *happened*. I can *believe* it because *I* can get *that* caught up in a good story the same way. The world falls away and *all* that remains are the words painting an image in my mind. I'm not a *fast* reader. I read at the pace of normal speech. In that way the dialogue becomes *real* to me as I *read* it at the same pace I'd *hear* it. I can almost *listen* to the characters' voices in my head, oftentimes taking on the tone of people I know or famous actors. I savor stories like a fine wine or a good meal.

When I turned forty-five, I began to feel an itch to read certain stories that I couldn't find. Unable to put off the urge, I began writing down some ideas. Some of them became short stories I wrote solely for myself so that once written I could then read them and see the events unfold in my mind, thus satisfying the craving for that kind of story. In 2019 I began a short story about a young boy who discovers why he had never fit in with his peers. It was because he was transgendered.

I have a sort of love-hate relationship with transgender fiction. Done *well*, it can reveal aspects of the human condition that are *sorely* under-explored, even in modern times. *Unfortunately* the rest of the time they become Mary Sue stories of simple wish fulfillment of the author's idea of a perfect life they'd like for themselves. While sometimes a good distraction from daily pressures, these stories are like junk food for the imagination; filling in the short term, but lacking in *substance*. The topic of transgenderism has come to a lot of attention, most *unfortunately* for those afflicted who, *generally* speaking, don't *want* the attention. They want to live their lives their *own*

way and perhaps, in *time* and without constant *reminders*, *forget* that they were ever anything else other than the gender they know themselves to be.

I know because I *am* transgendered. I have *always* known I am female, from the depths of my *soul* I've always known it to be true, but I was born with a boy's body. The W.P.A.T.H. Standards of Care, the definitive source for medical professionals treating people like me, defines transgenderism as a 'dysphoria', a "*discomfort or distress that is caused by a discrepancy between a person's gender identity and that person's sex assigned at birth.*" That is putting it *very* mildly. I *loathed* pretending to be a boy and later a man. I had to *hide* who I was and adopt mannerisms, speech patterns, interests, and activities not my own to hide my innate femininity from family, friends, schoolmates, co-workers, and even *strangers*. I cannot speak for *all* people like me; I wouldn't *purport* to. I know only *myself*. From *my* perspective, there are only *two* genders... male and female. They each have characteristics that are unique to them and, unlike the opinions of *some*, I don't think that's a *bad* thing. Men and women are, in fact, *different*. To say *otherwise* denies the pain and suffering I've endured living a life I *detested*. For if there *is* no difference between the sexes, why would it have caused me so much *pain* to be *one* and not the *other*?

If masculine and feminine traits are all learned behavior, then how could I, at the age of three, *know* that I was a girl and *maintain* that knowledge constantly through my life, against my *will*? If one wants to argue that it's because of something I learned *before* that age, then I would counter that if *that's* the case, it doesn't *matter*. Gender identity must *either* be something learned *so* young that it is out of our control by the time we reach sentience, or it's *born* in us *innately*. *Either* way, it's out of our hands by the time we're old enough to notice the difference.

This highlights the crucial flaw in *both* sides of the current argument. Hard-line conservatives argue that gender is *fixed* by genetics and thus those with a Y chromosome *must* be men and those without one *must* be women, and that anyone who *doesn't* act like it just needs to be 'fixed' with conversion

therapy or just suffer in silence. On the *other* side, radical progressives argue that *everything* about gender is learned, that we are *taught* how to behave like men or women and thus we can avoid gender distinctions *entirely* by changing what we are *taught*. This position has the unfortunate consequence that actually argues *for* conversion therapy being effective; *to wit*: If people *learn* to be masculine or feminine, then conversion therapy *should* work. Anything *learned* can be *un-learned* or *re-trained*.

Both positions deny my existence and experiences. I tried for *decades* to learn to be male and learn to *like* it. I *wanted* it to work, if only so I could fit *in* and not feel like a *freak*. The fact that I *couldn't* proves that I *am*, you *guessed* it, *inherently female*, *despite* my Y chromosome; a condition that no one on *Earth* is capable of changing. Ergo; *Femininity*, and by extension *masculinity*, are two fixed states that cannot be conditioned or educated out of human beings. I could not *exist* if it were not the case. My very life *proves* that both theories are hopelessly *flawed*.

My mind, my *soul* if you will, *cannot* be changed to match my body, no matter *how* much I might *want* it to. Since we *can* fix the body to match the soul, the logical and *compassionate* solution is to let people have the *liberty* to decide for *themselves*. One caveat: psychologists *should* have the final say in determining if a person truly *is* dysphoric to prevent people from *abusing* the system. Since women in this, and *most*, societies are afforded separate facilities from men for the purpose of modesty and emotional comfort, the right to *enter* these spaces *should* be limited to those who actually are *provably* female, either by virtue of genetics or verification by a licensed expert. Making a woman born in a male body use the men's room is *just* as horrifying as saying men should be free to use the ladies room just on their *say* so that they're female. Again, *both* arguments are hopelessly flawed for the *exact* same *reason*.

I'm lucky enough to be living in a time when medical technology exists to do something about my body and to live in a nation with liberties, that brave men and women fought and *died* for, that gives me the right to choose for

myself who I am and what kind of *life* I will lead. My father served in two conflicts to defend that right, and I am *blessed* that he's still here today to enjoy the fruits of his sacrifice on behalf of *all* of us. I find it disquieting that many of those who *most* benefit from those liberties are the ones *quickest* to disparage those who *defend* them, including the police that keep ignorant brutes from exacting their idea of 'justice' on people like me.

Regarding this novel, after writing my first transgender story, I found myself yearning to share my own experiences along this path. Mine has been a very complex, and sometimes schizophrenic, life; at once traumatic and horrifying and then happy and loving only to reverse itself again. The major events in this novel are *all* based on things that really *happened* to me, good *and* bad. My aunt going to prison, falling in love at eight, the murder of my cousin, the sleep-over, the house explosion, getting hit by a car, being invited to join the community orchestra, my Prom night, et cetera. All of them *really* happened pretty much as written. *Some* of the *minor* events are altered from reality in some way for the purposes of storytelling. Initially, I wrote a true autobiography, warts and all, and it included all the major events detailed here, as well as accurately detailing all the minor events in my life. When I lost the original manuscript of this story in a hard drive crash and found I was going to have to write the whole thing over again, I very nearly gave up on the idea (I was on chapter 18!) as writing it the first time was *arduous*. Getting every detail converted into words was like trying to bottle *sorrow*.

Part of the problem is that I remember *everything* from the time I was three until thirty-five. Most people remember the *big* events of their life. *I* can remember every single time I played my game, *Hide from the Witch*, when I was *four*. I remember the scent of Fantasyland and the Haunted Mansion. I remember Fluppy, my stuffed dog, but I also remember *every* time I played with her. I can see the faces of *all* the kids I went to school with, even if I didn't know their names. TV commercials, songs my sister and I made up, the Blue Bird Wish, every walk to and from the bus stop, I remember *all* these things in a stream of memory spanning over three decades like one enormously long movie in my head. (including me watching movies)

So when I began re-writing my story, I decided I would just hit the highlights for *total* accuracy and then 'adjust' the little things to be easier to write. Some minor events I put in never happened, such as my sister and I actually *talking* after I nearly killed her and myself at age twelve, but *everything* I wrote in the story captures how I *felt* at the time, which was the purpose of writing this to *begin* with. So, if someone is reading this who was *there* at the time and notices something that didn't happen quite the way I wrote it... *yeah*, I did that on *purpose*, *usually* because the reality was too hard, or too painful, to capture in story form. The same thing goes for the *people* in my life. Some people in this story at times can come off as cold, cruel, or even sadistic. I *love* my sister with all my heart. The things I describe in her proxy, Marie, are only painted from a single perspective; as an antagonist most of the time. *Yes*, she did say and do the things described here, but she also did a *lot* of things that were sweet, loving, kind, and generous that *aren't* in this story. I gave Rae the middle name Michelle for a *reason*.

Those things don't make for good storytelling though, and I couldn't write *every* event in my life that I remember or this would be a *series* of books mostly filled with boring passages about watching TV, reading, walking to school, et cetera. I had to pick a direction and *stick* with it. So *please* don't try to see more than is there in the depictions of my family and loved ones written here. *Each* of them in reality is a complete person with good and bad days, and my intent isn't to paint any *real* person harshly. These are just *characters* that represent *aspects* of people I know, and from one perspective; *mine*. *Anyone* can be painted as a monster by only showing the *worst* things they've done in their lives, including *me*. To the best of my knowledge, *nobody* in this world has been perfect for the last two thousand years.

As should be obvious by the title, this book deals with faith and specifically how I dealt with my dysphoria within the context of my Christian upbringing. Christians as a whole get a lot of bad press when it comes to gender issues, but the reality I have seen is that most of them are good people just trying to do the right thing. They just lack *perspective*. They look at some of the most *extreme* examples of the broad transgender community and see them

as *typical* because those are the only ones they know because they get press specifically *because* they've done something *controversial*. The truth is that *most* of us just want to be left *alone*, quietly transition into our correct gender roles, and *disappear* into society. The very nature of 'going stealth' though means that *they* cannot be held up as examples of the typical person that suffers this affliction.

Yes, I say *affliction*. It's a *defect*... a *flaw*... a quality that is *not* desirable in a perfect world. Even fixing my body through hormones and surgery hasn't given me the ability to birth a child. *No* child should be tormented by having the soul of a girl and the body of a boy, or vice versa, that they *despise*. These things are also no more *their* fault than the child born with no arms, blind, or who suffers debilitating diseases from birth. Do we blame the *child* for their affliction? Jesus spoke to this *specifically* when he was asked who had sinned that the man was blind from birth. His answer was that *nobody* had sinned, that he was afflicted so that the glory of God could be shown through him gaining his sight.

So then, who sinned, my *parents* or *myself*, that I was born male but with a female soul and heart? The answer is that *nobody* sinned. I was born this way so that His glory could be made manifest through the eventual healing of my body to match my soul. As Christians, we're tasked with doing Christ's work here on Earth. Since we cannot work *miracles*, we use science to work them *for* us; curing people's blindness through surgery and implants, making prosthetics that give people their limbs, or giving people like *me* a chance to fix some of the afflictions of our bodies. Jesus cured the man's *blindness*, his *bodily* affliction. He didn't make the man simply stop longing to *see*, the affliction of his *mind*. So what should we do, as Christians, when we see a person afflicted with gender dysphoria? Beat them and yell at them until they stop wanting to *see*? Or should we show the same compassion *Christ* showed when he gave the man his sight? Just *think* about it. If Christ were here today and came upon a transgendered woman, would he simply tell her to 'man up', or would he cure the ache of her soul by fixing her body to match the more *important* part of who she is... her *soul*?

Additionally, I want to address one controversial issue; trans-activism. Those calling attention to the suffering of people like me are doing more harm than good. Even if their intentions *are* benevolent, which I often *doubt*, all they are doing is putting a *spotlight* on people that don't *want* the attention. (and if they *do* want it, then they aren't really transgender, they're trans-trender) Are there those like me who need help? *Yes*. Is it helpful to scream at the top of our lungs, "*Hey! Look! This guy wants to be a girl! Let's help him!*"? *No*. She just wants to be fixed and hopefully someday *forget* the suffering she endured to *get* there, to be *accepted* as a *woman*. So long as people *know* she was born male, she will *never* get that, so calling *attention* to the problem isn't the *solution*. To those who *revel* in their trans-ness, who actively *identify* as 'trans', I would only say this. Just *stop* it! You aren't *helping* anyone and you're making it a *lot* harder for the *rest* of us to just live *normal* lives like everyone *else*. You're *worse* than the proverbial ignorant idiot that publicly mocks people like us. *He* at least has an *excuse*; he's *ignorant* and an *idiot*. *You* should know better! Just *stop it* and shut the hell *up!* You're making it *harder* for the rest of us to get *by* in life! (but that's probably what you *want*)

Finally, I want to say that it's my hope that *through* my story, otherwise good people that see people like me as something *sick, broken, wrong, sinful*, or just plain *weird*, will come to *know* me... and that *through* me, they will learn to be more *compassionate* toward those similarly afflicted. I also hope that others like *myself*, those who have *lost* their faith or simply never had any to *begin* with, can see a part of *themselves* in me... and that *through* me, they'll learn the love of God that is meant for *all* mankind... even, and *especially*, us *broken* ones. *Either* way, I hope you enjoy the journey and maybe just *think* about some things.

WWJD?

Sincerely,

Roberta Elder

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

Prologue

Little Rae Evans kicked her feet impatiently as she sat along the parade route. She knew what a parade was, she'd seen several in her young life and had even *been* in one, but to be sitting and waiting for a parade when there was so much *fun* to be had riding all the wonderful rides around her was torture for the barely three-year old girl.

Everywhere this year she kept hearing people talk about 'the Bicentennial', but she still couldn't figure out what it was supposed to be about. She still thought that because Independence Day was so close to her birthday that the fireworks and celebration were all for *her*.

"Settle *down*, Rae!" her mother Laura admonished, all while trying to keep her eyes on Rae's older sister, Marie.

Rae sighed and squatted glumly. Her arthritic knees were aching again, and kicking them helped alleviate the pain. Trying to distract herself, her large youthful eyes tracked the people going by; some walking leisurely toward their next attraction while others dashed about in a frenzy of frayed nerves. The air was warm, but not warmer than she was used to back in her high desert home, and was filled with the scent of buttered popcorn, suntan lotion, sweat, fresh-cut grass, and cotton candy.

She glanced over at her sister Marie, soon to be five, dressed in an outfit their mother had made. The two girls couldn't look any more different. One might even be surprised they were even *related* if shown apart from their parents. While Rae had straight and fine blonde hair cut in a shorter style with bright hazel eyes like her father, Marie had thick, long, curly hair the color of molasses and dark brown eyes like their mother. Contrasting that, many of Rae's features were like that of her mother; her nose, ears, high cheekbones, and the general shape of her face, while Marie had the fuller and rounder features that resembled the women of their father's family. Looking down at her outfit that Laura had made of the exact same material as her *sister's*

dress, Rae sighed, thinking that her sister's outfit was much prettier than her own.

Hearing music blare over the loudspeakers, she watched as a giant red, white, and blue parade float came slowly up to them and stopped, while grownups dressed in those same colors danced all around and on it, singing a song about freedom. She *loved* dancing, but her knees hurt too much to do it often, so after a bit she just moved side-to-side in rhythm with the song. As the song ended, the float began to move again and passed by her slowly while people all around clapped and watched the main parade make its way slowly toward them. Rae became bored again waiting for the main part of the parade to reach her, so she started looking around once more.

Then, in front of the caterpillar ride across the way from her, her sharp eyes spotted a group of other little girls gathered around a lady dressed like just a little girl all in blue and white. Rae's breath caught as she looked at the young woman who seemed to be *acting* like a little girl, too. Her dress was *very* pretty and her long blonde hair reminded her of her own short blonde hair. Rae reached behind her neck and pulled gently at the hair at the nape of her neck, wishing she could pull it out to be really long like the woman in blue and white.

She wasn't even paying attention to the parade as it passed her anymore, her eyes were transfixed on the small group of other little girls talking with the woman in blue and white and obviously giggling at something she said. Several of the girls were wearing red, white, and blue colored dresses, while others just wore plain white or pink dresses. One little girl she noticed wore cute pink corduroy pants with a white T-shirt with a smiling sunflower.

Lost in thought, Rae watched as the woman in the blue and white dress led the girls away from the parade and toward the teacup ride, finally losing sight of them as they made their way around the corner of the castle walls and beyond. *Someday...* she thought. *Someday when I grow up, I want to be just like her! I'll have pretty long blonde hair, pretty dresses, and I'll dance and*

sing and be like Mommy with two little girls of my own and we'll have so much fun!

Years later, she would look back on this event as her first memory; the one that she knew for *certain* was actually *hers* and not just a false memory created in her vivid imagination based on stories she'd been told, or home movies she'd seen about her very early unremembered childhood. *This* one memory was something she wouldn't tell anyone about for over twenty years, yet she could close her eyes at any time and see the woman in blue and white clear as day. Here she had been, just *days* after turning three years old, and *already* she had known what she wanted her future to be like. Life, it would turn out, had much *different* things in store for her.

Book I: Who Am I?

Chapter 1 - Turning Points

Once more Rae watched her sister Marie get on bus thirty-five as she headed off to school. The scent of dust and sagebrush mingled with that of hot tires, diesel exhaust, and that unique smell found on every school bus in America, the mix of hot vinyl and children's sweat. Unlike last year when Marie was in Kindergarten, this year she was in first grade, so Rae was alone until mid-afternoon with no one around except her mother and grandmother. She didn't *mind*, really. Usually they just let her play in the room she shared with her sister, digging through their giant toy box and playing with their many shared toys and games.

In many ways, Rae and Marie were spoiled for *things*, despite their family's meager means and the relative isolation of life in rural Nevada. Dolls, stuffed animals, toy cars, play jewelry, dogs, cats, and a wide assortment of clothes kept them both blissfully occupied. When Marie was home, Rae would just play whatever Marie wanted to and was happy with it. She looked up to her big sister adoringly and tried to emulate her, even learning to read as Marie was doing, despite being nearly two years younger. Her favorite game though was Dress-up, which Marie rarely liked to play. So Rae had begun to actually enjoy the times her older sister was away at school to leave her free to play as she pleased.

This day when she went in their room, she waited until she heard her mother washing laundry at the far side of the house, because she wanted to dress up in Marie's Blue Birds uniform again and play dolls. She'd done it many times before, even though she knew she wasn't allowed to wear her sister's uniform. She knew she was too young to be in the junior auxiliary of the Campfire Girls, but it was just too pretty to pass up the opportunity. It would be hours before her mommy came to tell her it was time for lunch, so she quickly threw off her own clothes and dressed in the uniform, admiring herself for a moment before getting a doll out of the toy box.

"OK, Mandy." she began. "It's time to drink your *milk!*"

Cradling the doll in her arms, she pressed the toy baby bottle to the doll's lips and began to sing '*Hush Little Baby*' softly. Every time she heard a noise, she would stop singing to listen carefully for the sound of her mother's footsteps, only resuming her mothering once she felt safe that it was just the creaking of the old house warming up in the rising temperatures of that September morning.

"It's *alright*, Mandy." she soothed her baby. "Finish your breakfast, baby."

After a time, she put the bottle down and placed the baby over her shoulder, patting its back the way she'd seen Marie do hundreds of times and the way her Aunt Darla used to do with her baby cousin Jacob. Returning to the toy box, she started to rummage around for a possible change of clothes for the doll, when her heart leapt to her throat at the sound of footsteps approaching the bedroom. Knowing she'd get in trouble for wearing her sister's uniform, she quickly dropped the doll and rolled under her bed, hoping that her mother or grandmother would walk past and go down the hallway, unaware of what she was doing. Unfortunately, she heard the doorknob turn and the sound of the door opening.

"*Rae?*" Laura intoned sweetly. "You *in* here, baby?" Not hearing a response, but remembering a time when her youngest had fallen asleep in the toy box and the panicked search for her that followed, Laura made her way into the room and looked around. "*Baby? You in* here?"

Terrified of getting caught, Rae hid her face and tried holding her breath, hoping her mother would go look outside for her and give her a chance to change back into her own clothes. Her heart beat loudly in her ears as she silently prayed for her mother to go away, but it was not to be.

Laura got down on her knees and looked under the bed, seeing Rae hiding and wearing her sister's uniform. Enraged and terrified, she shouted.

"Raymond Michael *Evans!* What are you *doing?* Get out here, *now!*"

Rae's world came crashing down around her. She knew with every fiber of her being that she was a girl like her sister, but her family kept *insisting* that she was a boy. She didn't really care for the boy toys they got her, and hated all her clothes for being ugly boy things. Even her two-year-old cousin *Jacob* was more of a boy than *she* was. None of the other boys she knew would ever be caught *dead* playing dolls or liking dresses, but Rae did, so she *must* be a girl. More than *that* though, she knew it in her *heart*. Hoping it was all just a bad dream, Rae tried to hold back the tears that were already starting to flow.

Angered that Rae was not only wearing her sister's clothes but also failing to obey her, Laura reached in and grabbed her arm, pulling her bodily out from under the bed. "I said to get out here and I mean *now* Ray!" she barked. Standing her up and seeing her crying, she was confused and scared. "What do you think you are *doing?*" she asked sternly. After an interminable silence, Laura swatted Rae on the butt in an attempt to force an answer. "*Answer* me!" she shouted.

Unable to answer through the terror she felt, Rae could only blubber and wail even louder.

Seeing her so scared, Laura calmed herself and sat on Rae's bed, pulling the girl to sit next to her and waiting for the crying to stop before asking again, this time more calmly. "*Ray?* Why are you wearing your sister's *clothes?*"

Sniffing several times, Rae tried to think of an excuse, but came up blank. Knowing that if she didn't answer her mother would get angry again, she tried to do what she was told. "I... I..." No matter how many times she tried to say it, the words just wouldn't come out.

"Ray, I *need* to know." Laura said calmly. After a short time with no answer, Laura began to lose her patience. "Just spit it *out!*"

Taking a few deep breaths to calm herself, Rae tried once more. "'Cuz... 'cuz I... I'm... I'm a *girl*... like *Marie*."

Closing her eyes in frustration, the signs obvious for some time now, Laura shook her head and tried to explain once more, having gone through this the year before with her child. "*No, baby. You're a boy. You'll always be a boy. You'll never be a girl! You'll never grow into a woman! You won't wear dresses, you won't grow breasts, you'll never have children or be a mother...*" Pausing a moment, she added a warning. "*No one will like you if you try to be a girl!*"

Her mother's words cut deep. *No one will like me if I'm a girl? But if I am a girl, then... then that means even Mommy won't like me unless I pretend to be a boy!* Tears began to well up in her eyes. *No! She's wrong! She has to be!* Slowly, anger took the place of her fear. *She's wrong! Mommy's wrong! I will be a woman! I have to be! I know I'm a girl! I know it! You'll see Mommy! I'll be pretty, and have babies, and... and...* Pain cut through her heart unlike any she would ever know. *What if Mommy's right? What if I grow up into a... a man!*

New tears formed in her eyes as she fought back the despair and horror at the concept. Focusing on the anger she felt, she let it fill her to stop the tears as a new thought formulated. *Alright! I know I'm a girl, but Mommy and everyone else think I'm a boy and will hate me if I act like a girl, so I'll just have to pretend I'm a boy! But someday, when I grow up and become a woman, they'll all see and be sorry!*

Laura saw her four year old stare out the window, a defiant expression washing over her face like a wave. Mistaking the resolute look for one of defiance and intent on getting through to her, she stood suddenly and pulled Rae to her feet. "*Alright, mister! Strip!*"

Humiliated and broken as her anger melted in fear of her mother, Rae obeyed as tears fell down her cheeks. Once stripped down to her sister's underwear

and looking up at her mother's angry face, she blushed and removed them to stand naked in her room; shame overwhelming her.

Reaching down, Laura swatted her naked butt. "*That's for taking your sister's things!*" she yelled. "Don't you *ever* let me catch you doing *anything* like that *again!* Understand me, *mister?* Now *get* dressed in what I laid *out* for you this morning! *Understand?*"

She wanted nothing more than to cry, but anger toward her mother, and hatred toward the world for being so cruel, consumed her. The only thing she couldn't stop were the tears that fell silently down her cheeks. After her mother stormed out of the room, Rae collapsed onto her bed and allowed the tears to come freely. Her bottom didn't *really* hurt... her mother never spanked her hard enough to cause more than a split-second pain... but the emotional trauma at the thought that her mother couldn't love her as the girl she really was inside was too much to bear.

She lay there for almost an hour sobbing into her pillow, broken only by the occasional glance over at her sister's things... things that were now forbidden to her. The closest thing she had to a girl's toy was her stuffed puppy dog 'Fluppy' with the red silk inside the ears that she clung to for comfort. After a time, she got up and did as her mother told her; putting her ugly boy clothes back on and returning to her bed to think.

"I'm a *girl.*" she told Fluppy. "I *know* I'm a girl! I'm a *girl*, but no one *believes* me!" Putting him down, she closed her eyes and prayed silently. *God? It's Rae. Can you help me? Everyone tells me I'm a boy, but you and I both know I'm really a girl, right? Can you fix it so everyone else knows I'm a girl too, and stops calling me a boy? People calling me a boy and treating me like a boy hurts my feelings!* As another hour passed without anything happening, she began to draw within herself. The happy girl with the infectious laugh slowly built a wall around the shattered remains of her heart, until all that remained was a sad stoicism and a festering hatred of a cruel world that was going to force her to be a boy.

Weeks passed as she tried to act like the boy her mother expected her to be, but she just couldn't figure out *how*. She *hated* all the things boys seemed to love. Sports? Her father Gerald seemed to *love* them, but all she could manage was feigned interest... sitting in front of the TV while her father, grandfather, and uncles yelled, while she pretended she was a princess trapped in a dungeon by the Wicked Witch from *The Wizard of Oz*. Cars? *Boring*. Roughhousing? She shuddered in revulsion at the rough play that she only engaged in because it was expected of her.

Denied her sister's toys and clothes, she started playing with her own things out of sheer boredom at first, but soon she was playing pretend games with them as a means of escape. Her games became her only outlet for the ones girls usually play. Her green army men secretly became her 'children', and she would invent elaborate stories to fill her childhood emptied of the games she longed to play. Her favorite game was *Hide from the Witch*. She would take her 'children' out to the dirt lot kitty-corner to her grandparents' yard where the sagebrush grew tall. One bush in particular had a small cavity at the base that she could crawl into, which became her hiding place. Once there, she would lay her 'children' out in the dirt and cover them with dead leaves like blankets. If anyone caught her, she could just say that her army was making an ambush for the enemy. No one ever did, but she felt she couldn't risk anyone finding out the truth of what she was doing, so she had a cover story.

"*Shhhh!*" she warned them. "Don't *cry*! If you *cry*, the Wicked Witch will *find* us and do *terrible* things to us! It'll be alright! You're *safe!*" Eventually she would hear the bus coming down the dirt road and knew that her game was soon to be over. Quickly, she would gather her children and hide them in her pockets. "The *Witch!* She's *found* us!" she'd cry as she scurried out of the sagebrush to run as fast as she could toward her sister's bus stop.

Marie got off the bus and saw Rae running toward her from out of the vacant lot. Rolling her eyes, she shook her head in disapproval. "You *know*

you're not supposed to play in that yard, Ray! If *Mom* catches you, you'll get in a *lot* of trouble!"

When Rae heard her sister's admonishments, she stopped running and started to walk with her around the block and back to their grandparents' house; talking about what Marie had done in school that day. The bane of Rae's existence however, got off the bus *with* her; the neighborhood twin boys... Brian and Ryan.

"Hey, *look!*" Brian mocked. "It's Marie's little *dog* come to see her home from school!"

"Knock it *off*, Brian!" Marie retorted. "He's only *four!*"

Ryan laughed and pointed at Rae's clothes covered in dirt. "Looks like your puppy likes to roll in the *dirt!* Come *on*, Brian!" At that the twins pushed Rae into the ditch, landing on a prickly bush and some sharp rocks and infuriating the little girl who already hated the world.

As her two tormenters ran off home laughing, Marie helped Rae back up. "*Sorry*. Let's just go *home*. Are you *OK?*"

Rae just shrugged, her poor girlish pride dying a little more. *Boys aren't supposed to hit girls!* she said to herself. It was just one more cruel reminder that the world was out to grind into her that she would never be accepted as a girl. Silently, she walked home with Marie and listened to her older sister talk about school. This was repeated on an almost daily basis for months. The insults and methods changed, but the attacks always came.

One day, Ryan went too far and threw a clod of packed dirt at Rae which exploded in a shower of small pebbles and dust as it hit her face. Hearing the two boys laugh at her, and feeling the sting of dirt in her eyes, Rae snapped and quickly picked up a rock from the road; rearing her arm back

and throwing it as hard as she could at him. It bounced ineffectually off his book bag, but it stopped the boys laughing instantly.

"Hey! No throwing *rocks!*" Brian complained, as though there were rules to bullying. Seeing Rae bend down to retrieve another rock, the two ran pell-mell for home as fast as their legs could carry them.

Rae, her fury nowhere close to spent, let sail another rock; this time at Brian's retreating form to land squarely between his shoulder blades.

"*Ouch!*" he cried. "*Jeeze! He's flipped out!*"

As Marie saw her reach down for yet another rock, the shock of the situation finally wearing off, she shouted at her sister. "*Ray! No! Stop!*"

Another rock sailed from her hands toward the cruel duo; tears of frustration and anger pouring down the girl's flushed cheeks to mix with the remaining dirt and dust from their assault on her and mixing into a muddy mask of pain and loneliness. Seeing the rock land just to the right of Ryan, she cursed her errant aim and picked up one more rock to try again, only to have her sister's hand stay the counterattack.

"*Stop it, Ray!*" Marie shouted. Seeing the tears that had become twisted into a face of fury, Marie took a step back and released her hand. "*What's wrong with you?*"

Seeing them run too far away to be hit, Rae's frustration at the world turned on Marie. "*Why did you stop me?*" she growled. "*They deserve it!*"

"*That's not what I mean!*" Marie barked back. "*You've been different for months. Always angry, you never smile or laugh! What's wrong?*"

Rae almost sobbed in frustration. *I wish I could tell you, Marie! But if you found out and stopped loving me, I'd have nothing left!* Despair overtaking

her, her shoulders sagged and she dropped the stone as the futility of her situation drove all will to keep fighting for her identity from her being. "I'm *sorry*, Marie." she intoned flatly and emotionlessly. "I'll try to be better."

Weeks passed with Rae drawn entirely within herself. What little interaction she had with her family was curt and often dripping with barely restrained anger. Her mother saw the change and, one afternoon during lunch, she sat with her to talk.

"*Ray*? Is something the *matter*, baby? You haven't been *yourself* lately."

Rae stopped eating her sandwich in the middle of taking a bite and looked up at her mother. *That's because you won't let me be myself, Mom!* she fumed. Knowing better than to voice her fury, she simply shrugged and resumed eating in silence.

"Are your *legs* hurting more, baby?" Laura asked tentatively.

Shaking her head slowly as she finished her bite, she sighed. "No, the aspirin still helps." She didn't know what Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis was. All she knew was that her knees would sometimes swell up like they had small smooth stones in them and hurt really bad. Then her mother would give her the bitter baby aspirin, the pain would lessen, and the rocks would go away. She just considered the pain to be normal.

"Then what's *wrong*, sweetie?" Laura pleaded.

Unable to answer truthfully without angering her mother, Rae just shrugged and changed the subject, letting Laura believe her new subject was the cause of her unhappiness. "Brian and Ryan are always picking on me and chasing me." she stated flatly and resumed eating.

Laura grimaced. "Well, then don't *run*!" she admonished, hoping it would help her son be more manly. "They can't *chase* you if you don't run!"

Rae stopped eating and stared at her mother as if she'd just suggested fixing a headache with a hatchet. *That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!* she mused. *Oh yeah! They wouldn't be chasing me anymore! They'd just catch me and beat the tar out of me again, stupid!* she directed her thoughts at her mother. *But then maybe you'd like that! After all, boys are supposed to like fighting, right?* Her rage built up in her, but fear kept it from showing. Shoving the feelings down inside her, she just looked at her food and pushed it away. "I think I'm done."

Seeing less than half the lunch eaten, Laura frowned. "Sit and eat that until it's *gone*, mister! And be *glad* you have it!" At that she got up and left her child to fume alone.

Knowing she would be forced to sit at the table until it was gone, Rae choked down the rest of lunch and stormed off to her bedroom. Grabbing one of the metal trucks she'd gotten last Christmas, she half-considered throwing it through her bedroom window before she sat down in the middle of her room to push it back and forth meaninglessly while staring at her sister's many dolls, stuffed animals, pretty toys, and clothes.

Later that afternoon, she heard her mother walk past her room and out the back door. Hearing the car motor start, her heart leapt as she quickly got up and ran out of her room and out the back door. Running up to the car, she waited while her mother rolled down the window.

"Where're you going?" Rae asked, hoping that she'd guessed right.

"I'm running down to the store to pick up some things. I'll be gone a while." Laura answered as she waited for the car to warm up. "Grandma Jewel will be here if you need anything." Thinking it nothing more than childish curiosity, she started to roll up the window to guard against the chill of the early spring air.

Trying to repress her joy at the hope of going to the store, Rae put on her best stoic face and asked nicely, "Can I come with you?" One of her few joys in life was going to the store; even better if it was one of the big stores in town that sold pretty girl clothes she could at least look at and imagine wearing... and girl toys she could imagine playing with.

Frustrated with her son's mercurial moods and just wanting to get there and back again, she shook her head. "Next time, baby. Now go inside."

Being dismissed and denied, on top of the bad advice to combat bullying that her mother had shown her earlier, Rae's eyes narrowed as she glared at her mother before storming off to the back door, slamming it as she went back inside. Her girlish temper boiling over, she stopped just inside the house and balled up her fists before making a quick turn and throwing the back door open. Leaning out the door she screamed at the top of her lungs, "*I hate you!*" before slamming the door once more and storming off to her room to sulk.

Less than a minute later she heard footsteps pounding their way ominously back down the hallway from the back door. Terror filled her heart as she immediately regretted having lost her temper as the door to her bedroom flew open and her mother's five-foot-nine height loomed over her. Storming into the room and reaching a hand back, Laura slapped Rae across the mouth.

"Don't you *ever* talk that way to me again or so *help* me I'll knock you into next *week!*" Laura snapped. She knew she hadn't slapped Rae hard, just enough to get her attention, but she couldn't let Rae get away with her outburst as it would only fuel more defiance.

Rae tried as hard as she could to stay angry at her mother, but her girlish heart broke at the thought of her mother beating her up the way Brian and Ryan did when they would catch her. Combined with her mother's admonition earlier to not run away from a fight she couldn't hope to win, she became convinced that her own mother *wanted* her to get beat up... that

Rae somehow *deserved* to suffer pain and torment. Her lower lip sucked into her mouth as the tears began to fall. Throwing herself on her bed, she bawled openly as her mother left and returned to the car.

Hearing the vehicle drive away, she was suddenly overwhelmed with fear as she imagined her mother never coming back, making her cry even harder. Her overactive imagination played out a thousand scenarios where her mother, upset and distracted by her tantrum, would lose control of the car and never come home. She could almost see her mother's car going out of control on the dangerous hill where she and her sister had seen many accidents happen. Some had been so gruesome that the two children were made to put their heads in their laps while passing them to protect the two from the vision of mutilated bodies they might see, which only fueled Rae's imagination.

Rae had seen many of the animals her grandfather trapped or shot, gutted and hung up, so she knew basic anatomy already. That, in addition to her children's encyclopedia that included pictures of human musculature, skeletons, internal organs, veins, nerves, and tendons, let her mind fill in the blanks with images likely far more graphic than any roadside accident.

Interminable hours passed while Rae lay in her bed; each passing moment making her more and more certain that the last words she had said to her mother were hateful and angry. When finally she heard the distinctive sound of the car pulling to a stop near the back door, she raised her head from off her pillow for the first time since her mother had left. Hearing the sound of the back door open and the familiar rustling of paper bags, finally allowed her to let go of the paranoid imaginings that had haunted her.

After Rae heard nothing more of her mother bringing in whatever it was she had bought, she got up out of her bed and gingerly made her way out to the kitchen. Seeing her mother sitting in the dining room on the far side of the kitchen smoking a cigarette, Rae slowly made her way toward her and

waited until her mother could see her. "*Mom?*" she began softly. "I'm *sorry* for what I said. I *love* you."

Putting down her cigarette, Laura held her arms open to her youngest child. "Come *here*, baby." Cradling Rae in her arms, the two hugged silently for some time before Marie came in through the front door, home from school. Nothing more was ever said of the incident, but from that day forward, no matter how angry or upset she was with someone, Rae would try to never let them leave somewhere without saying 'I love you.' before they left. '*You never know when it will be the last time you see them.*' she would say.

Chapter 2 - Growing Pains

Rae sat on the floor in the living room of her Great Aunt Vera's house. It was only days from her fifth birthday but her parents and grandparents were leaving, not to return for several weeks. She knew something really bad had happened, but no one would tell her what was going on... not even Marie. All she knew was that everyone was going to miss her fifth birthday while she and Marie would be staying here.

She'd been looking forward to her birthday for months, ever since she had first seen the new toy she'd asked for earlier that year... *Legos*. In *her* mind it was the answer to *all* her problems; for here was a toy that was *supposed* to be for boys, but with which she could build *anything* she wanted... even a *dollhouse*... and no one would ever know that's what it was unless she told them. Now convinced that she would have to wait the unending time until Christmas before she could get any, she wallowed in her own self pity as her family made ready to leave.

To make things worse, she had to stay with her Great Aunt Vera. She *did* love her family dearly, and had a special connection to her Great Aunt. The childless widow, who now lived with her widowed sister Luanne, had once had a husband named Raymond Michael Prichard who died right before Rae was born, explaining how Rae got her name. It was through *understanding* how she got her name that Rae was finally able to give herself a real girl's name instead of just the nickname 'Rae'. In hearing the story about her namesake, she learned that if she had been born a girl her parents would have named her Rachel Michelle instead of Raymond Michael. So Rachel felt a certain extra bond with her Great Aunt for the gift of her true name, even though nobody knew the real reason. There were downsides to being under Aunt Vera's roof, though.

The downside was that the woman had very strict ideas about boys and wouldn't tolerate a 'wimp' in even the slightest way. She would make even little boys like Rachel's three year old cousin Jacob show her their muscles

and would shame Rachel when, in Vera's opinion, her muscles weren't big enough. She would also shame her when she would see Rachel avoiding the roughhousing that the boys liked. By contrast, her little cousin Jacob and her other boy cousins relished showing off their muscles to their Great Aunt and enjoyed her praise for being 'rough and tumble' *manly* boys.

Laura, seeing her sulking in the corner of the living room, knew she had to explain what was happening before they left. Taking a moment, she gingerly walked up to Rae and offered a hand up. "Come on, baby."

Taking her mother's hand, Rae was helped up and gently guided to the dining room table where she sat down before her mother began.

"Ray, I *know* you're upset that we're going to miss your birthday, but I want you to understand *why*, OK?" Laura explained softly. "See... something has happened to your Aunt *Susan*... something *really* bad."

Rae's eye's widened as she saw her mother's eyes begin to water. *If it's something so bad it makes Mommy cry, it must be really bad!* she reasoned. Looking up at her mother, Rae gulped before speaking. "Did... did she *die*?"

"No, baby." Laura explained through a tear before she wiped it away. "But she's hurt *really* bad and... um... she's been *arrested*."

Rae was stunned as she looked over at her sister Marie who'd begun to cry. She wanted nothing more than to cry along with her sister and mother, but with her Aunt Vera looking on, she choked it down and just listened.

Laura wasn't sure how much her not-yet five-year-old child could understand, but she had to make the effort. "She... she and her boyfriend tried to rob a store in Oregon using guns and she... they got shot by the police. Do you know where Oregon is, sweetie?"

Rae nodded slowly, remembering reading about it in her encyclopedias and from her State puzzle map at home. "It's north from here?"

Stifling another tear, Laura nodded and forced a smile. "Very *good*, baby! It's a *long* way north, and we don't know how long we'll be *gone*... probably a few weeks at least while we figure out how we can help your Aunt Susan. So we can't be *here* for your actual *birthday*, OK? But you'll still have a *party* here with Marie and your Great Aunts and cousins and some of your presents... and I'll tell you *what*! When we get *back*, we'll have one *big* party for both you *and* Marie, *alright*?"

Hearing that, even as she'd started to smile weakly, Rae suddenly frowned as she stopped thinking about her Aunt. *One party for both of us? I know what that means. she grumbled to herself. That means a party for Marie and I get a few dumb presents. It'll be her and all her friends and everybody paying attention to her and nobody will even care about me. They probably wouldn't even notice if I wasn't even there. Marie always gets good presents and everyone loves her! Just wait and see! She'll get to have a party on her actual birthday and I'll just sorta be there, too. It's just not fair!*

Seeing Rae's expression go flat, Laura stood up and looked down at her. "What's *wrong*? Are you worried about your Aunt Susan?"

Shaking her head 'no' slowly, she looked up at her mother. "Well, yeah I am... but... can't I have my *own* party when you get back?"

Laura's expression clouded over. "*Look* mister, you're being *very* selfish! You need to think about *others* for once!" Calming herself she added, "Remember, as the oldest boy you'll be the *man* of the house, so I want you to *act* like it. Take good care of your sister, your cousins, and your Aunts, and we'll see you in a few weeks."

As Laura turned to go, Rae sniffed before she mumbled, "I *love* you, Mom."

Stopping in her tracks, Laura fought to keep from crying at the sentiment. Turning back, she held out her hand and helped Rae up, crouching down to hug her goodbye. "I love you *too*, baby. Be *good* for your Aunt Vera and try to think about what I *told* you, *OK*?" Releasing her and hugging Marie goodbye, she told her oldest child, "Take care of your brother and be a *good* girl while we're gone, *OK*? We'll be back as soon as we *can*." After that, many hugs were exchanged before the children were left alone with their Great Aunts for several weeks.

One bright point for Rae in the whole affair was that on her actual birthday the following Sunday, she did get the Legos she'd been hoping for. The *downside* being that her Aunt Vera kept her so busy 'building up her muscles' with back-breaking labors around the yard that she wouldn't get the chance to actually *play* with them until her parents got home and she was back in her own bedroom.

The birthday party was held the Saturday before Marie's birthday, so while neither of them got a party on their actual birthday, the event was held just when it *would* have been if it had only been for Marie anyway... and it went about as Rae expected. The house was filled with Marie's friends from school, while Rae didn't *have* any friends to invite, so she just ended up playing with her Legos in the living room and listening to the sounds of her sister and most everyone else laughing and having fun without her.

It was over an hour before Laura noticed Rae's absence and went looking for her missing child. Finding Rae playing by herself, she watched as Rae meticulously assembled the little house that she was building while humming a random little tune. "What're you *building* there, baby?" Laura asked.

Her mind lost in a world of girlish delights, Rae was imagining the hours she would spend playing dolls with the house she was building. Hearing her mother's voice so close startled her back into reality and caused her to jump slightly and stop humming with a sharp drawn breath, almost as if she feared her mother could read her mind just by being so close while

'Rachel' wasn't hiding. "I..." Looking up at her mother, she imagined telling her the truth... that she was building a dollhouse... and then imagined her mother taking away her Legos so she would be denied any chance at playing anything girly. Thinking quickly, she tried to think of what a boy might build. "I... I'm building a *firehouse*." Luckily for Rae, the assembly could be mistaken for any building at that point.

Smiling, Laura looked down at Rae. "Well, you'll have to show me when you're done!"

Rae's heart sank. *I should have known. Mom's gonna make sure I'm not playing dolls or any girl games with my Legos. What's the point?*

Not noticing Rae's crestfallen attitude, Laura smiled and held out her hand. "You can finish building that *later*. It's cake and ice cream time!"

Taking her mother's hand, Rae got up to eat, even though her heart just wasn't in it. When she got to the dining room where her sister and her sister's friends were laughing and talking, she tried to go to her seat near the head of the table next to her sister, only for one of Marie's dark-haired friends, Tracy, to push her away.

"That's *my* seat!" the girl snapped, her fair complexion reddening. "Stinky *boys* go to the *end* of the table! This isn't a dumb *boy's* party!"

Seeing no one in the room notice what was going on over the din, Rae felt small and sad. "It's supposed to be *my* party, *too*." she retorted shyly.

Tracy looked at her like she was examining an insect. "Oh, *brother*! Can't your sister have a party without *you* having to be in it? I bet you even expect *presents* too! *Boys*! Everything has to be about *you*, doesn't it?"

Rae's heart shattered as the worst of her predictions came to pass. *I knew this was going to happen.* she thought dejectedly. *All she sees is a boy*

invading his sister's birthday party. No one even knows it's supposed to be my party too. Because that's all it really is... just Marie's party.

Laura pulled the chair out for Rae, blissfully ignorant of the heartbreak her youngest had just gone through, or what had caused it. "Come *on* Ray, take your seat and I'll bring out the cake!"

"But Mrs. *Evans*," Tracy whined, "*I* was sitting there!"

"You'll have to move to *another* seat, Tracy." Laura instructed, failing to mention *why* Rachel deserved a seat at the head of the table.

The girl glared at Rae, blaming her for being moved. "*Jerk!*" she muttered just loud enough for only Rae to hear.

Tracy moved down to the other end of the table while Rae took her seat, watching Tracy whisper to the other girls while staring daggers at her. The other girls then similarly glared at Rae as though her mere existence was an affront to all girls everywhere. Rejected and broken, Rae sat back in the chair and zoned out, losing herself in her imaginary world where the girls that surrounded her were all *her* friends, too. The party, which her mother had re-used the decorations from Marie's birthday the year before, was *really* also for her, and she was wearing one of the prettiest dresses there... as pretty as Marie's. She hardly even noticed when the cake was placed in front of Marie and herself, seven candles on one side and five on the other. She also had no interest in seeing both their names written in frosting on top with her name spelled like a boy's name.

Finally noticing something wrong with Rae, Laura misinterpreted the reason and assumed that she was still pouting over not getting a party all her own. Bending down, she whispered into her glum child's ear, "Now listen *here*, mister! You better straighten *up* and *appreciate* this! Stop *pouting* because you didn't get your way and have *fun* or so help me I'll bare your *butt* and blister it in front of all these *girls*! Do you *hear* me?"

Wanting nothing more than to run off to her room to cry alone, Rae was too scared of her mother to dare defy her. Choking down the tears once more, she sat forward and plastered a fake smile on her face. "Yes, Mom." was all she said.

After the candles were all lit, everyone started singing *Happy Birthday* in unison. When it got to the line where everyone was supposed to sing, "Happy Birthday Ray and Marie," all the girls in unison only sang "Happy Birthday, dear Marie!" so loud it drown out the few adults who sang the song to both of them.

Rae almost lost control and started to cry, but the warning from her mother rang in her ears as she weakly tried to blow out the five little candles, failing in even that as a single tear escaped and trickled down her cheek.

Marie, unaware of the loneliness in the heart of her little sister, simply saw an opportunity to one-up her and quickly blew a second time to extinguish the two candles of Rae's that remained lit, as the assembled girls cheered her victory over 'the intruding boy'. Smugly smiling over at her younger sibling, it was only then that she noticed Rae wiping a tear off her cheek.

As Laura cut slices of cake for the assembled children, she placed the first slice in front of Marie and the second in front of Rae, smiling as she hoped the child's attitude would be improved.

Seeing that the cake was chocolate, her *sister's* favorite instead of the strawberry that *she* liked, Rae shook her head solemnly. "No *thank* you, Mom. I just want strawberry ice cream."

"We only have Neapolitan, Ray..." she said dourly. "...and you should have some of your birthday cake!"

"Yes, Mom." was all she said in reply. Knowing that she was skating on thin ice as it was, she dared not even voice her own likes or dislikes. *Not*

that it matters what I like. she grumbled to herself. I never get anything I really want, anyway. I don't deserve it. I must be a bad person. She sat patiently waiting, while her mother cut up the cake onto little paper plates, then started scooping out the ice cream. When she saw her mother happily put a scoop of mostly chocolate and vanilla with only the barest sliver of strawberry in it onto her plate, Rae's heart died a little more. *She doesn't even care what I want! I have to like what she thinks I should like!* Getting up from the table, Rae excused herself. "I need to go to the *bathroom.*"

Laura, exasperated to near the breaking point with Rae's moping bringing down what was supposed to be a festive and fun time, closed her eyes and calmed herself. "*Fine! Hurry back before your ice cream melts!*" she barked.

Locking herself in the far bathroom while the party went on without her at the other end of the house, Rae looked at herself in the mirror, tears flowing freely as she silently cried and sang to herself.

"Happy Birthday to you... Happy Birthday to you... Happy Birthday dear *Rachel...* Happy Birthday to you."

Finally overcome with emotions she barely understood and could no longer contain, she covered her face and turned away from the mirror, sliding her back down the side of the bathroom sink's counter until she fell onto her butt as she began to sob uncontrollably. Through her tears, she whispered to herself. "I'm a *girl!* I'm a *girl!* I'm *not* a stinky boy! I'm a *girl!*" No matter how many times she told it to herself, images of rejection kept intruding on her thoughts.

"You'll never grow into a woman!"

"Stinky boys go to the end of the table! This isn't a dumb boy's party!"

She tried to twist Tracy's words around to mean that it *was* a girl's party and so that meant she must be a girl too, but the snotty tone of derision

directed at her, along with her mother's rejection of her true self, kept cutting into her like a knife.

"*God?* Please! *Help* me!" she cried. "Make me a *real* girl! It hurts *so much!* I *can't* be a boy! I just *can't!*" She got onto her aching knees and began to pray to Him silently, begging for help. Some time later her silent prayers were interrupted by a knock on the door.

"*Ray?*" Laura called out through the door. Trying the knob and finding it locked, she became concerned. "*Ray? Are you OK, baby?*"

Wiping her cheeks dry as she got up on her feet as quickly as she could, Rae sniffed. "Be out in a second!" she shouted. Quickly dropping her pants and sitting on the toilet, she relieved herself and flushed, using the sink to wash her hands and tear-stained face before opening the door.

"Other people need the bathroom *too*, Ray." Laura chided gently.

"*Sorry.*" Rae demurred shyly. "I had to go number two."

"Well your ice cream was melting, so I had to give your plate away." her mother sighed. "Want me to fix you a *new* plate? There's *plenty* left."

"That's *OK*, Mom." Rae moaned. "I don't really *like* chocolate cake, *anyway.*" Her eyes grew wide in fear as she realized she said out loud what she was thinking and backed away from her mother, nearly hyperventilating in fear that she would be punished for sounding ungrateful.

Seeing her child recoil in fear at expressing a simple *preference*, Laura's brow furrowed in concern. Deciding that backing off would be the best course of action, she backed away from the bathroom entrance and looked toward the party. "It's *fine*, baby. We need to get back to the party now so your sister can open her presents. I was making her wait for *you.*"

Rae went from scared to dejected as she concluded that the only reason her mother had even come to *look* for her was that she was holding up her sister's birthday party; that she was *required* to be there to be tortured by seeing all the things Marie would get that she'd never get to touch. "*Sorry.*" was her only reply as she slipped past her mother and headed for the dining room once more. Turning the corner, she looked through the kitchen at the table and saw Tracy once more in her seat, laughing and eating Rae's cake and ice cream. Stopping short, she almost jumped when she felt her mother's hands on her shoulders pushing her onward.

When Tracy saw Rae coming, she sat back in the chair and crossed her arms, defiantly *daring* Rae to try and eject her from the seat next to Marie once more. As soon as Rae and her mother were next to her, Tracy steadfastly refused to move.

"*Tracy?*" Laura said sweetly. "Could you move back down to the other end of the *table* please, sweetie?"

"*No!*" Tracy refused. "Make *him* sit there! This is *my* seat! Marie is *my* best friend and it's *her* party!"

"But Tracy dear, Ray is Marie's *brother...*" Laura pointed out. "...and it's *his* party, *too.*"

Tracy looked up at Laura and her stubborn refusal seemed to be pointless. In her mind, Laura was going to 'spoil' the apparent boy by letting it be 'his' party too, when it *should* only be *Marie's* party. Sighing and getting up dejectedly, Tracy relented. "*Alright, I'll move.*" Stopping a moment, she leaned in and whispered in Rae's ear. "*I hate you! I hope you die!*" Smiling sweetly up at Laura, she appeared to happily move back down to the end of the table again.

Laura smiled as she looked down at Rae. "Did she just kiss your *cheek?* I think she *likes* you! Girls sometimes act like that to boys they like!"

Rae was first stunned and then terrified that a little girl would want her dead over a seat she didn't even want. Compounding her fear was the shock that her mother could be so ignorant about what was really going on at the party... a party of almost exclusively seven and eight year old girls where Rae wasn't welcome. Taking her seat silently, she waited while Marie tore into her first present.

Laura and Gerald Evans tried to treat their two children *equally* with no preferences apparent, so they had seen to it they both would have the same number of birthday presents. Rae, however had already *opened* a few gifts on her *actual* birthday while they were away, and Marie had gotten several *more* due to the gifts brought by her friends, so the stack was quite obviously unequal. For every present Rae had, Marie had three... only reinforcing the appearance that the party was *really* for Marie, while Rae was nothing more than an afterthought... or even *worse*, a spoiled child pushing her way into a party that wasn't really *hers*.

When Rae was finally goaded into opening her first present after Marie had opened five, the other girls at the table fell silent and glared at her as she opened the box to reveal a cream-colored vest and tie for her first day of school. It was never any fun to get things you needed *anyway* for a birthday present. In *this* case it only served to further prove to everyone at the party that Rae's parents had just wrapped something they were going to give her anyway, just so she didn't feel left out of her sister's party.

Even worse for Rae was that she hated getting boy clothes as a present. As she looked at the clothes with a semi-disgusted expression, she looked up at her parents and swallowed her girlish pride, slapping a fake smile on her face. "Thank you, Mom and Dad." Sitting back while Marie opened several more presents, Rae looked on as envy for her sister's gifts began to erode what little of genuine gratitude she possessed. Cute tops, jewelry, barrettes, and girly toys seemed to mock her as she looked down at the boy's suit she'd been given.

As the afternoon passed and kids started going home, Rae returned to her Legos, only to find them missing from where she'd left them. Terrified that they'd been stolen by one of the kids at the party, she ran up to her mother. "Mom! My *Legos* are gone!"

"I put them in your *room*, baby." Laura explained as she put away the ice cream and cake. "I didn't want anyone to *step* on them. You need to stop leaving your toys all *over* the place."

Relieved, Rae went into her room to find them, only to see her sister Marie playing with them instead.

"Oh, *hi* Ray." Marie sang as she finished pulling apart the house that Rae had begun earlier.

Infuriated that Marie wasn't satisfied with her *own* toys that Rae was *forbidden* from playing with and had to have hers *too*, Rae stormed up to her sister and pushed her away from them. "Those are *mine*!" she screamed.

Falling back onto the floor, Marie yelled back. "You little *jerk*! I was just *borrowing* them!"

Rushing into the children's shared room, Laura saw Rae standing over Marie with a furious look on her face. "What goes *on* in here?"

Getting up, Marie pointed a finger at Rae. "*He* pushed me down just for *touching* his stupid *Legos*!"

"You didn't just *touch* them!" Rae countered. "You..."

"*Enough*!" Laura shouted. "If you can't learn to *share* Ray, then maybe I'll just take them back to the *store*!"

"No!" she cried. "You *can't!* It's not *fair!* I have to share the *only* toy I really like with *her* and *she* doesn't have to share *anything* with me!"

Marie quickly jumped on the double standard. "You can play with my *dolls* anytime you *like*, Ray!" she said in a snide tone, knowing it would be the last thing she'd ever admit to in front of their mother. "*Can't* he, Mom?"

Laura looked at Rae with a knowing stern expression. "Ray wouldn't *want* to play with your dolls, Marie. Isn't that *right*, Ray?"

Looking up at her mother and wishing she could tell the truth, she was forced into a corner to lie at her mother's behest. "*No.*" she answered.

"Well, that's not *my* fault!" Marie snapped in retort. "*Besides*, he acts like I gave his Legos *cooties* or something! He can put them back the way he had them anytime he *wants!*"

"That's not the *point*, Marie!" Rae shouted at her sister. "You just got a whole *ton* of toys and the first thing *you* do is tear apart the house *I* spent all that time *building!*"

"I thought you were building a *fire* station?" Laura asked sharply.

Realizing she'd accidentally let slip what she was really building, Rae backpedaled to cover the lie. "Um... it's a fire *house*, isn't it?" Rae hated lying to her mother, or anyone for that matter, but to her mind her mother was *insisting* that she lie. *It's not like she really wants me to tell the truth... she practically insists that I lie about what I really want!* Rae brooded.

Looking at her, she could tell Ray was just quibbling over details and wondering why she would lie about building a Lego house. Sighing in exasperation, Laura pointed toward the bathroom. "*Bath* time, mister. In and out... *post-haste!*"

"Can I take my Legos *with* me?" she asked hopefully.

"They're not *bath* toys!" she answered harshly. "And I want you in and out *quickly*... not spending all evening playing in the *tub*! *March!*"

Defeated, Rae shuffled towards the bath, knowing that Marie would spend the entire time playing with her Legos then still be able to play with her *own* toys when she got bored with Rae's. *It's just not fair!* she pouted as she drew her bath. *Marie gets all her things and mine and I can't touch hers or Mom'll hate me!* Looking up, she tried one more time. "*God? Please? Help me?*"

While the two lay in their beds to go to sleep, Marie sat up and looked over at Rae's bed, hearing muffled sounds of sobbing. "*Ray? Are you crying?*"

"*No.*" Rae sniffed and lied, because boys weren't supposed to cry.

"So are you going to tell me what's *really* wrong then?" Marie pressed. "If it *helps*, I think I already *know*."

Sitting up, Rae looked over at her sister. "*So? You think you're so smart... what's wrong then?*"

Marie looked at the ceiling. "I think you're *jealous* that *I* had lots of friends at the party and you *didn't*... and that I got more *presents* than you."

Sighing, Rae rolled over to face the wall, sniffing the tears back. "*Sure. That's it exactly!*"

Marie scowled and shook her head. "Well then, what *is* it? I *know* you were *crying* when we blew out our *candles*, and every time I opened one of my presents you got a look on your face that was... well... *jealous!*"

Rolling over and wiping her eyes dry, Rae nodded in admission. "You're *right*... I *was* jealous... but *not* because you got *more* presents."

Confusion crossed her face while Marie tried to make sense of Rae's answer. "But if you weren't jealous of me getting *more* presents, then what..." She stopped as something occurred to her that she'd never considered. "*Ray*... you weren't jealous of *what* I got were you?"

Nodding, Rae could barely hold back the terrified tears, unable to hold it inside anymore without telling *someone*. "I... I think I'm a *girl*."

Marie shook her head. "No *way*, Ray! You are *definitely* a boy! You have *boy* parts!"

"But I'm not *like* any boy!" Rae retorted. "I *hate* sports, I *love* dolls, trucks and cars are *boring*, pretty clothes are *cool*... does that *sound* like any boy *you* know?" Seeing her sister about to say something, Rae cut her off. "I... I think I was *supposed* to be a *girl*... but something got messed up and the *Angles* put me in a *boy* body by *mistake*." Rolling over to face the wall again, Rae sighed. "I just wish I could be a *normal* girl like *you*, Marie... then I could be *happy*."

Chapter 3 - Schoolhouse on the Rocks

Rachel sat in the classroom, watching the clock tick the seconds toward three o'clock. Kindergarten had been easy. The only thing she'd had to do was the simple work she was given in class and behave herself. While there occasionally had been issues with behavior, it was always due to one of the boys picking on *her*, which the other girls in class were quick to point out, if for no other reason than to get the boys in trouble.

Best of all though, was that for the last year Marie had been secretly letting Rae play with her toys when none of the adults were looking. The few times they'd been caught, Marie insisted that she'd *made* Rae play House or dolls, taking some of the heat off her sister and letting Rae have a few happy moments of girlish childhood.

Now however, in first grade, she had extra homework to complete on top of class-work. While it was relatively *easy*, especially the reading that was years below the reading level she'd attained even before Kindergarten, the drudgery of working through it all on top of her chores at home left no time that Marie wasn't around to sneak in playing Dress-up. Marie was too scared to do it, ever since the one time their mother had caught them and threatened to punish Marie the next time she 'made' Rachel dress like a girl. In point of fact, ever since Marie turned eight, she'd been less and less willing to cover for her sister as she lost interest in the 'little girl games' that Rae still liked.

As her grades declined, her parents became stricter with her time. Often she would be stuck at the dining room table for hours, dragging her feet through makeup work while daydreaming about being a *real* girl and getting to be *happy* again. She had *moments* of happiness when she would forget her circumstances, but they were always fleeting and getting less and less distracting from her misery as time went on.

Sitting in the silent classroom, she looked at the other girls in the class and daydreamed that she was just like them. She imagined herself with pretty

long blonde hair like Brenda, perhaps wearing Betty's pretty flowery dress or Carol's cute skirt and top. Then on recess, instead of wandering aimlessly while trying to avoid the boys' teasing, she could be playing jump rope with the other girls or playing the clapping games that were still popular among girls in the last year of the seventies... ones she'd memorized at a distance and *occasionally* got to play with her sister.

When the bell woke her from her world of pretend, she realized that the assignment she'd been given was still sitting on her desk... completely blank other than her name. The math assignment was easy for her, but just having to write her 'boy' name was enough to make her depressed and let her mind wander off into her world of make-believe. Now faced with the fact that she'd not done a single thing all day, Rae tried to sneak the paper into her desk and rush out of the room without catching the teacher's eye.

"Ray?" Mrs. Blake said as Rae mingled with her fellow classmates' rush toward the door. "Ray Evans? Could you *stay* a moment?"

Trying to extricate herself from the situation, Rae glumly looked toward the door as the rest of the kids made their way out of the room. "I have to catch bus thirty-five before it *leaves*, Mrs. Blake. I live in the next valley, so I can't just *walk* home."

"You can spare a *few* minutes." her teacher admonished. "You didn't turn in any of your *assignments* today. Is something wrong at *home*?"

Rae sullenly looked down at her shoes. "*No*, ma'am."

Sighing, she stood and walked around her desk. "Ray, I *know* you're a bright boy. You could be getting *much* better grades if you would only *apply* yourself." She handed Rae a note listing her current subject grades along with a letter. "I know it's not report card time yet, but I want you to give this to your *mother*. She can call me at the number I put down *anytime*. I want to talk to her about your poor performance."

Taking the letter, Rae stuffed it in her bag and nodded. "I'll give it to her." she lied, intending on getting rid of the note as soon as she left the room. Looking up at the clock, then at the door, Rae fidgeted from foot-to-foot, anxious to leave. "Can I go now?"

Sighing and shaking her head, Mrs. Blake nodded. "*Alright*, I don't want you to miss your *bus*. I'll expect a call from your mother *tonight*."

Running from the room, she nearly broke out in tears at the realization that her plans to destroy the note were dashed by her teacher's intended follow-up. She had only made a step out of the classroom before she heard the voice of Roy, a boy from her class.

"*Look! Sissy got held after class! I guess he's a retard as well as a wimp!*"

Hearing the laughter of several other boys, Rae started to bolt toward the busses, only to realize that Roy had positioned himself right in her path. Trying to run around him and the other boys, Rae found herself being chased all over the playground before she managed to make her way to the bus pickup area. The entire group of boys were hot on her heels as she reached her bus and launched herself up the stairs to safety.

Noticing the bus driver shake her head as she closed the door behind Rae, the dejected girl made her way down the aisle, several times having to dodge feet stuck out in the aisle in unsuccessful attempts to cause her to trip and fall. Finally making her way to the seat Marie was in, having saved it for Rae, she dropped into it with an exhausted thud.

"You almost missed the *bus*, Ray!" Marie noted disapprovingly. "If Mom had to come *get* you, she'd have been *mad!*"

"Mrs. Blake kept me after class." Rae sighed. "Then *Roy* and a bunch of guys chased me. I think they were *trying* to make me miss the bus."

"Want me to meet you at the door to your room after school so they leave you *alone*?" Marie offered, genuinely concerned.

Rae shook her head slowly. "If you *do*, they'll just pick on me even *more* at *recess*." she pointed out.

Fuming, Marie stared out the bus window. "Boys are so *stupid*!" Looking over at Rae, she added, "Not *you*, I mean... I mean *boy boys*."

Shrugging, Rae half-smiled. "*Thanks*, Marie. But you don't have to stand up for me. It wouldn't help, *anyway*."

Seeing how depressed Rae was, Marie smiled and leaned over to whisper in her ear. "*Hey!* When we get home, wanna play *dollhouse*?"

Almost perking up for a minute, even managing a slight giggle, Rae slumped back down. "I... I got a note from Mrs. Blake to give to Mom. I think I'm going to be grounded for the rest of *forever*!" Pulling the note from her bag, she handed it over to Marie to read.

"*Ray!*" Marie whispered. "Mom's gonna be *so* mad! Why don't you just do your work and stay out of trouble?"

Shrugging, Rachel took the note back. "It doesn't *matter*. Mom's been making sure I don't have a *chance* to play girl games, even if I *do* stay out of trouble. She just gives me more chores to do to keep me so busy that I *can't* play when nobody's around *anyway*. So what's the *point*?"

Leaning in close, Marie whispered again, "Do you think Mom *knows*?"

Rachel sighed in resignation. "*I* don't know... maybe she just thinks I need more work to keep me *busy* because I'm a '*boy*' and she's trying to make me *tough*. I think she might have even *forgotten* about me wanting to be a girl. The last time she caught me she just called it a '*phase*' that I'd outgrow and

that she was just trying to help me do that *faster*... and that was way back in January like a *million* days ago, so..."

"Maybe Mom's *right*." Marie opined. "Maybe you *will* grow out of it and *want* to be a boy someday! Then I could have just a *regular* brother!"

Looking over at her sister, Rae furrowed her brow. "Is that what you *want*, Marie? For me to be your *brother* and not your *sister*?"

"Well, you *aren't* my sister, Ray. You're just my brother who *wishes* he were my sister. I don't think you're ever going to be a *real* girl."

"God could fix me if I keep *praying* for it!" Rachel snapped quietly at Marie essentially calling her 'not a real girl'. "God can do *anything*!"

"You've been praying for that for *years* Ray!" Marie snapped back. "I think if He was *going* to change you to a girl, He'd have *done* it by now!"

Nodding, Rae relented to the point. "I guess even *God* wants me to be a boy." Almost in tears, she choked the sadness back until only anger and apathy remained. "Sometimes I think it would be better if I just *died*. Then I'd be in Heaven and if I wanted to be a girl I *could* be."

Marie's eyes went wide as she heard her six-year-old sister contemplating death. "Don't even *say* that Ray! If you *died*, everybody would be sad... *especially* me!" Pausing a moment, she was almost too afraid to ask her question. "You haven't thought about *killing* yourself, have you?"

Rae looked up at Marie surprised. "*No*! If I did *that*, I wouldn't get to go to *Heaven*... I'd go to 'the other place' and be stuck as a boy *forever* just to *punish* me!" Rachel shuddered at the thought of what she considered the ultimate torment... eternity as a boy.

When the bus finally arrived at their stop, the two got out and made their way home glumly. Ryan and Brian had learned not to pick on Rae around Marie anymore. They'd tried once after school had started, only for Marie to threaten to hit them and then tell their mom if they fought back and hit a girl. Reaching their grandparents' house, they were surprised to see their father's car home early, Marie racing into the house.

"*Daddy!*" Marie shouted as she ran in the front door. Seeing him sitting on the couch talking with their mother, she ran up and hugged him as Rae slowly made her way into the house and glumly approached her parents.

"Kids? Sit down. Your mom and I have some news to tell you." their father Gerald instructed them. Sitting on the carpet, the two looked up at their parents expectantly. "You two, your mom, and I are *moving*. I bought sixty acres out near Fallon and we're going to build a *house* out there."

In shock, the two children looked at their parents in disbelief. Finally, Marie spoke up. "But that means we'll be moving away from *everybody!* My *friends*, Grandma and *Grandpa*, Aunt *Vera... everybody!* I'll have to start all *over* in a new *school* and *everything!* It's not *fair!*"

Laura shook her head and stopped Marie's tirade. "That's *enough*, missy! The world doesn't revolve around *you!* This is a *discussion* and you *will* hold your temper!" Looking over at her husband, she sighed in resignation. She wasn't happy about the move *either*, but she wouldn't tolerate disrespecting parental authority. Noticing Rae's solemn silence, she looked at her and cleared her throat. "*Ray?* You haven't said anything. Can you tell us what *you* think..." She eyed Marie as she finished. "...*without* loosing your temper?"

Shrugging, Rae's glum attitude was unfazed by the news. If anything, she was hopeful that she'd be moving away from the boys like Roy that regularly picked on her and had an opportunity to maybe make some actual friends. "I guess it's *OK*. When will be leaving?" Already she was thinking that the

news meant they might be leaving soon enough that her note from the teacher wouldn't mean much anymore.

Gerald smiled and looked at Rae's apparently mature attitude about the move. "Two weeks." he answered happily in his deep baritone voice. "Now understand... because there's no *house* out there *now*, we'll have to live in the *camper* at first."

Over the next half hour as the four talked, the two children learned that Marie would be going to a different school because the closest school had no more room in their third grade classes. Finally, as the two were sent off to do their homework, Laura stopped Rae.

"Your teacher *called* me this afternoon, Ray." she began. "Do you *have* something for me?"

Nodding silently, she pulled the crumpled note from her bag and handed it over. Waiting, she stood while her parents read the note together.

"*Well*, it's about what I *expected*." Laura admitted darkly.

"*What?*" Gerald yelled, his hazel eyes flashing in anger. "You *knew* he was goofing off in school? Why is *this* the first I'm hearing of it?"

Snapping back, Laura was in no mood to be barked at. "You've been too busy with *work*! I was *trying* to not *burden* you with it!"

While her parents argued back and forth, Rae tried desperately to hold back the tears. *They're fighting and it's all my fault!* As her parents looked to Rae and then at one another, she saw them exchange a look that the girl knew meant, '*We'll finish this later.*' as she'd seen it before.

"*Son*," her father began, running a hand through his brown hair that had been blonde like Rae's when he had been a small boy growing up in

Southern California in the 1950s, turning darker as he got older. "I expected a lot *more* from you after the good grades you got *last year*."

"Your teacher told me over the phone that you're spending most of your time in class *daydreaming*." Laura said as she looked down at Rae. "Why aren't you doing your *work*? We all *know*, including Mrs. Blake, that you *know* the material... your *test* scores are all near the top of the *class*. So *why* aren't you doing the *work*? You could be getting straight A's if you just *applied* yourself. What are you *daydreaming* about?"

Gerald shook his head as he eyed his youngest child. "You need to do the *work* they give you, Son. Someday, when you become a *man*, your boss won't put *up* with not getting the work done. You'll learn sooner or later that work is *not* an option... so you might as well start *now*."

Even as Rae endured her parents' verbal disappointment, she stopped listening and began imagining being their daughter and how if everyone just *knew* she was really a girl she wouldn't be daydreaming about it in class, so her parents wouldn't have to argue about it, so everyone would be happy. Unable to answer Laura's question without incurring their ire, Rae just stood in front of them and shrugged; her eyes never looking up.

"*'I don't know'* isn't a *response!*" her father barked at her, his five foot ten frame towering over her. "Now *man-up* and tell us what's going *on?*"

Heartbroken as only a six year old girl can be when told to 'man-up', Rae just shook her head and sniffed back her tears. Caught between answering them honestly only to lose their love or disobeying them and being punished, (or even worse, trying to lie to them only to get caught in a lie and punished until she was *forced* to tell them the truth) she chose the least painful option and just refused to answer.

An hour later, she sat at the kitchen table doing homework with a sore butt and a broken spirit. Unable to invent a convincing lie to end the spankings,

she simply *endured* it until her *parents* came up with their *own* explanation, that she was doing it for *attention*, and left her alone to work until she started behaving the way they *wanted*... like a good six-year-old *boy*.

After the move, things not only *didn't* get better, they got far worse than Rae could have ever *imagined*. Where they were living was *so* far away from town that she *didn't* even *have* neighbors with kids her age to make friends with. Worse *yet* was school. Her school records having been transferred, her new teacher, Mrs. White, never even gave her a chance to get to know her before she classed Rachel as a 'trouble student'.

Since Marie was at a different school, Rae *didn't* even have her sister there to stand up for her when the teasing and bullying began. She tried her hardest to be a good girl, doing everything the teacher and her parents asked of her, but it seemed that everything she did was never *enough*. At recess she was once more relegated to trying to avoid the other kids as much as possible just to survive. The few times she tried to play with them they teased her mercilessly, tormented her at every opportunity, and forbade her from even playing on the playground equipment.

The worst was having to use the restroom. While it was bad enough that she had to use the *boy's* room, it was made even *worse* that there were no adults in there to stop the boys from kicking her, pushing her to the floor, urinating on her shoes, or anything *else* they thought they could get away with... and the bathroom was *never* unoccupied at recess. It got to the point that she would just not *use* it at recess and only go during class when she could go *alone*. This only reinforced with Mrs. White that Rae was just a lazy troublemaker trying to avoid work.

The ride back home on the bus with Marie was mostly passed in silence. Lacking an actual house to work in, and homework in the camper being difficult, the two would do as much as they could on the bus. Rae's spirit became more and more disheartened as the weeks dragged by.

When October came and the weather turned cold, the half-mile walk to their bus stop along the sandy dirt road was a trial of endurance. By this time, their father had put some wooden storage sheds together and insulated them enough to be *livable*, though without plumbing for a bathroom or electricity. Marie and Rae were moved out of the camper for sleeping and playing, but it made no difference to Rae. She never had a moment's privacy to be *herself*.

One day after school, Laura approached Rae as she worked on her homework at the tiny table in the camper. "Have you thought about what you want to be for *Halloween* this year, Ray?"

Rachel's pencil stopped writing as the question caught her off guard, her mind racing with all the possibilities that she could never ask for. Marie, having heard the question through the open door, came running in from their room.

"I know what *I* want to be, Mom!" she shouted excitedly. "Since I still have my angel wings from last year, I wanna be a Fairy *Princess!*"

While Marie began describing her costume, Rae wasn't even listening. *What do I care about Halloween? All I'll ever get is some stupid boy's costume... like my Robot costume or other dumb stuff and Marie always gets cute outfits!* Trying to think of a way to be a girl that her mother wouldn't reject, she hit on an idea that, while it wasn't necessarily a *girl's* costume, was at least not an obviously *boy's* costume, *either*.

When Marie finished describing the pretty costume idea she had, Laura looked at Rae reservedly. "How about *you*, baby?"

Looking up at her mother, Rachel took a breath and hoped. "Can I be a *clown?*" While she didn't like clowns, Rae could see a lot of advantages to it. *Clowns wear makeup, wigs, and you can't tell boy clowns from girl clowns... so I can be a girl clown and no one will know!*

Looking at Rae's hopeful face, she sighed. "Well, I *suppose* so. You'd have to wear *makeup* though. Some of the boys might make *fun* of you."

Trying to hide her intent and interest, Rae made a face. "*Makeup*? I hadn't *thought* of that. I guess I'd *have* to, though. And a wig *too*, right?" She tried not to sound excited as she asked and did her best imitation of boyish disgust.

Laura eyed her before answering. "I have one that would work. Are you *sure* that's what you want? Why not a *cowboy* or your *Robot*?"

"The Robot costume doesn't *fit* anymore." Rae pointed out, glad that it wasn't even a lie. "And *nobody* does *cowboys* anymore, Mom!"

"*Alright*." Laura conceded. "I'll need your help *making* it though."

Starting to smile at the thought of being taught to do sewing, something that she only ever saw the women in her family do, Rachel quickly hid her feelings and nodded seriously. "*Alright*, Mom."

That night while settling in, Rae heard stirring in the upper bunk. Seeing a head drop down to look at her still in bed, Marie had a worried look.

"*Ray*? When Mom asked about a Halloween costume, why did you say you wanted to be a *clown*?" she asked incredulously. "I *know* you don't like clowns... you think they're *stupid*. So what's *really* up?"

Sighing and looking away, Rae didn't answer.

Marie's expression went from perplexed to irritated that Rae was keeping something from her. "What did you *really* want to be? *Truth*!"

Looking up at her sister, Rae sighed and closed her eyes as she tried to gather up the courage to say it out loud.

Nodding in understanding, Marie whispered, "You wanted to be a *girl* for Halloween. *Didn't* you?"

A frustrated tear rolled down her cheek as Rae nodded. What she *really* wanted to be, what she'd wanted to be *every* Halloween for the last three years, was *Alice in Wonderland*. She *still* couldn't shake the memory of the woman dressed as Alice from when she was three, but she'd never told *anyone*, not even Marie. She knew it was a hopeless dream. *Mom would kill me before she let me dress up as Alice!* Rachel thought as she wiped the tear off her cheek. *But even if I could wear any girl costume, it would at least be something!*

"You're *still* on *that* kick?" Marie asked in hushed tones. "I thought you grew *out* of that?"

Shaking her head, Rae sighed. "*No*. I... I just sort of gave *up* because I never get the *chance* anymore. Mom's *always* watching me."

Marie slowly retreated back up onto her bed and was quiet for a long time; so long that Rae thought she might have just gone to sleep. After a while, Rae heard her sister moving around again, finally seeing Marie silently climbing down the ladder to her upper bunk. Gesturing for Rae to get out of bed, Marie took her by the hand and led her over to the trunk that contained Marie's toys and some play clothes. Opening it as silently as possible, Marie pulled out a violet dress of hers that was a little too small for her anymore, but that she was loath to get rid of because it was still her favorite.

Rae's heart beat so hard in her chest that she could hear it in her ears; certain that it was loud enough for her parents to hear all the way in the camper's cab-over bed where they slept. Terrified and thrilled at what was happening, she stood in awe as Marie held the dress up to her.

Smiling that the dress would fit, and that Rae would actually be *cute* in it, Marie silently folded the dress back up and put it back where she'd gotten

it, closing the lid before leading her younger sister over to their beds. "I have an *idea*." she whispered. "But I want you to tell me the *truth*. If I can convince Mom to let you be a *girl* for Halloween, you *promise* me you won't chicken out?"

Nodding her head vigorously, Rae stood in wide-eyed awe of her sister's audacity. *Marie? Convince Mom to let me be a girl for Halloween? If she can do that, I'll do anything she asks of me for the rest of forever!* Unable to even speak, Rae just quickly hugged Marie as hard as she could to express her gratitude. Finally she managed to squeak out, "I... I *love* you, Marie!"

The next morning Marie told Rachel of her plan while walking to the bus.

"Saturday, Dad'll be away at work, so it'll just be you, me, and Mom." she explained. "We'll get up early and, since Mom sleeps *in* on Saturdays, we'll have time to get ready."

"Get ready for *what*? " Rae asked nervously as she walked beside her sister. "What do you have in *mind*?"

"I'm gonna dress you up in my favorite old dress, do your makeup, put Mom's old brown wig on you, and let you use my *prettiest* jewelry. Then when you look like a *perfect* little girl, we'll wait for Mom to come out and see how *cute* you'd look as a girl, tell her it's what you *really* wanted to do this year but were afraid to *ask*, and that it doesn't need *any* costume parts that need sewing or *anything*. Sort of just *hit* her with it all at *once*! Then you give her the 'little girl' eyes!" Marie smiled. "You know what I *mean*?"

Rae stopped and looked at Marie with eyes wide and her eyebrows arched.

"*Perfect!*" Marie giggled. "Maybe you really *are* supposed to be a *girl!*"

When the two resumed walking toward the bus stop giggling together, Rae fell silent for a moment. Finally she asked, "*Marie? Why are you doing this*

for me? I mean, don't get me *wrong*, if you can *do* this, I'll be like your slave *forever*! But why help me be a *girl*?"

Stopping, Marie sighed. "I don't *know*... I guess because you're just so *sad* all the time. Last night, when you told me you *still* wanted to be a girl, even after all this *time*, I guess I just felt *sorry* for you. Maybe Mom's *wrong* and this *isn't* just a phase." As they resumed walking, Marie sighed. "I also know you *really* miss playing *dolls* and stuff with me... and I guess I really miss playing them with you, *too*."

Rachel walked silently alongside her sister for a moment before commenting. "*Marie*? Do you miss having other girls to *play* with?"

"*Yes*!" Marie admitted immediately. "I mean, don't get me *wrong*... you're an *OK* brother, but sometimes *I* wish you'd been born a girl! I'd *much* rather have a little *sister* than a *brother*! No *offense*!"

Giggling back, Rae shook her head. "None *taken*! I'd *much* rather be a *sister*! I *hate* having to pretend to be a boy! Boys are *stupid* and *mean*!"

Looking over at her little sister, Marie scrunched up her face. "Are you getting *picked* on still?"

"*Worse* than *before*!" Rae admitted. Coming to a halt at the bus stop where the dirt road met the paved road, they stood together and waited for the bus to arrive. "My new teacher *hates* me, too. Mrs. White is *always* yelling at me for daydreaming and asking to go to the bathroom." Embarrassed that she still wet the bed at six, Rae had always had bladder trouble, but it seemed that it was getting *worse* ever since she'd started first grade; ever since she started getting picked on every day.

Marie looked over at Rae. "What are you *daydreaming* about usually?"

"Promise not to laugh?" Rachel asked shyly. Seeing her big sister nod enthusiastically, she looked away down the road to see the bus coming.

"Usually I'm imagining what it would be like if everyone treated me like a girl instead of a stinky *boy*. Then I could be *happy* and I wouldn't *ever* get in trouble *ever again!* I'd be the *best* little girl *ever!* *Mostly* because I'd be afraid that if I *wasn't* then I'd have to go back to being a *boy*. Having to pretend to be a boy is like the *worst* punishment *ever!* Be glad that *you* never have to!"

Looking at Rae in a new light, Marie put her hand on her sister's shoulder. "For what it's *worth*, I think you'd be a better *girl* than a *boy*... and I *do* wish you could at least be *happy* more."

Sighing as the bus approached, she looked back at her big sister smiling at her and felt genuinely hopeful for the first time in years. "*Thanks!* Even if it's only once in a *while*, and even if it's only because you miss having other *girls* to play with, it's *still* better than pretending to be a boy *all* the time!"

The bus pulled to a stop next to them and Marie watched as the happy girl vanished behind the 'sad little boy' mask once more, as though someone had just closed the door to happiness.

Chapter 4 - From Bad to Worse

The next few days of school flew by for the two as they waited for the weekend to arrive. Marie watched their father drive off to work in the early morning hours of the cold Saturday eighteen days before Halloween, silently creeping over to Rachel's bed to shake her awake.

"Ray!" she whispered. "Ray! It's *time!*"

Sitting up quickly, Rae was wide-awake and quickly checking herself for wetness. Relieved, she found the night had passed without an accident like the rest of the week, which truth be told was an unusual event. Even *more* unusual, she'd managed to not daydream in class the rest of the week and was in her mother and Mrs. White's good graces for once. All week she'd been praying the same thing, over and over.

God? Please! If I'm the best little girl I can be, will you make Mom let me at least be a girl for Halloween? I'll do all my homework and pay attention in class all year long if you let me be a girl... even just one day a year!

Springing out of bed happily, she giggled in an almost euphoric haze. "Good *morning!*"

Stunned, Marie looked at her. "You *never* get up easy! I guess you're kind of *excited*, huh?"

Rachel shrugged after a yawn and stretch. "I *guess* so. *God*, I hope this works! If it *doesn't*, Mom just might *disown* me!"

"Mom would never *disown* you, Ray!" Marie retorted. "Mom *loves* us *unconditionally!* She *has* to! It's like a *parent* thing!"

Each in turn taking a moment to quietly sneak into the bathroom in the camper, Rae waited nervously for her sister in their room. With the scene

of her mother's outrage when she caught Rae in Marie's Blue Birds uniform replaying in her head like it had just happened, she was almost in a fit of hysteria when Marie finally returned.

"*Marie!*" she whispered in the dark of the early autumn morning, "I don't know if I can *do* this!"

Irritated, Marie put her hands on her hips. "You *promised* you wouldn't chicken *out*, Ray!" she whispered angrily.

"*I know! I know!*" she answered fearfully. "But you don't know how *mad* Mom got the *last* time! She as much as *told* me she wouldn't *love* me anymore if she caught me doing it *again!* I'm *scared!*"

Seeing the terror in Rae's eyes, Marie tried to think of something that would help calm her down. "Sit *down.*" she commanded gently. Once seated next to Rae she said, "I don't think I can call you 'Ray' once you look like a *girl.* I should give you a *girl's* name!"

Sniffing back tears of fear, Rae shook her head. "I *have* a girl's name."

"Raymond Michael *isn't* a *girl's* name, *stupid!*" Marie shot back quietly.

"Mom once told me that if I'd been born a girl, they would have named me Rachel Michelle... so that's what I call *myself.*" Rae explained.

Scrutinizing her, she nodded approvingly. "*Rachel* is good. You could look like a Rachel. Actually, I've heard girls named Rachel use the nickname *Rae*... only spelled with an E instead of a Y... so even if I slip up and call you 'Ray' by mistake, you could just take it the *girl* way!"

Nodding, Rae approved. "That's what I do *anyway.*"

Standing again, Marie held a hand to her sister. "OK, *Rachel*... feel *better?*"

"No!" Rachel admitted. "But I think I *have* to at least *try*. *Thanks* for not giving *up* on me." She hugged her sister tightly as she shivered in fear.

Returning the hug, Marie smiled. "OK, Rachel. Let's get you *dressed*! We'll do the makeup and hair next, and the jewelry last, OK?"

Nodding and letting Marie use her like a live dress-up doll, Rae was given a pair of Marie's panties. Terrified and loathing her own body, she looked at Marie. "You have to turn *around* first."

Rolling her eyes, Marie folded her arms and turned around. "Girls change in front of each other all the *time* Rae! Besides, I've seen it *before*!"

"But I hate *anyone* seeing it!" Rae explained as she got undressed from her boy pajamas. "Even *me*! I *hate* having a boy body!"

"Just *hurry*, alright?" Marie sighed. As soon as she heard Rae stop moving, she turned around and giggled. "You *already* look like a little girl just wearing my *undies*, Rae!"

Blushing, her younger sister fidgeted with her fingers nervously. "Just tell me what to *do*, OK?"

Half an hour later, Rae was seated on Marie's toy chest as her older sister finished applying a little makeup on her face. Trying to hold still was difficult, but she did her level best not to irritate her mentor and potential savior. Once complete, she watched as Marie examined her work.

"*Perfect*!" Marie nearly squealed. "Now the *hair*!" Taking the wig that their mother had used when she was younger and then given to Marie to play with, she placed it on Rae's head, tucking a few errant blonde hairs away until none showed. Then, holding it in place with one hand, she began to brush it out until she was satisfied with the look. Stepping back and taking a good look, she could see that she was almost done. "Now jewelry!" Marie

picked up a plastic box and removed a beaded necklace from it as well as two matching clip-on earrings.

They were cheap plastic, but to Rae they were things that she'd always envied of Marie's. Holding her hair up, she let Marie put the necklace on her, then attach the earrings to her virgin earlobes. Settling her hair back in place, she felt for the first time the wonderful sensation of earrings tickling the side of her face and long hair moving against the nape of her neck while the violet dress with white lace trim rustled quietly against the white tights she wore. *Regular girls get to feel like this all the time?* she marveled. *I could die right now and be happy!*

"Want to *see*?" Marie asked with a smile.

Nodding slowly with the happiest smile of her lifetime on her face, Rachel let Marie escort her over to the window in their room. Since it wasn't yet dawn, she watched as Marie took her flashlight and shone it on her, letting the only light available reflect off the glass.

Rachel gasped as she saw a beautiful brown-haired girl her own age looking back at her from the glass. She could scarcely breathe, she was so transfixed. *That's me!* she stared in awe. *I look like any other little girl! I knew I was supposed to be a girl! I just knew it!* Smiling happily, Rachel bounced up and down on the balls of her feet and almost clapped in happiness. Spinning around in unadulterated joy, she relished the moment.

"Oh, *Marie!*" she whispered loudly. "*Thank you so much!*"

Not quite sure of what to say, Marie just smiled and looked at her elated sister. "You're *welcome*..." she whispered. "...but you need to be a little more *quiet* or you'll wake up Mom and she'll be in a bad mood for being woken up *early* and ruin *everything!*"

Covering her mouth, Rachel went wide-eyed once more. "*Sorry!*" she whispered. "Wanna play *dollhouse*?"

The two played quietly like normal sisters for nearly two hours before Rae heard the first stirrings from the camper where their mother had been sleeping. Standing up with terror in her eyes, she nearly began to hyperventilate before Marie grabbed her hands.

"Calm *down*, Rachel!" she whispered. Futzing with Rae's hair until it was perfectly back in place, Marie led Rae over to the door to the camper so that she would be standing near it when their mother came out. "Now wait *here* and try to *smile!*" she ordered. "I'm gonna go get *Mom.*"

Closing her eyes, she crossed her hands in front of her to keep from fidgeting and took several deep cleansing breaths until her nerves were more settled. *Mom loves me.* she tried to convince herself. *Mom won't hate me for being a girl. Moms have to love their kids!* Not yet convinced of her mother's unconditional love, fear began to well up inside her and threatened to make her run away. Planting her sister's pretty shoes firmly in place, she forced herself to stay and take the chance.

Listening intently, she heard her mother through the door flush the toilet and come out of the bathroom.

"Good *morning*, Mom!" Marie chirped happily. "I started your *coffee!*"

"Oh, *bless* you, dear!" Laura groaned. "Where's your *brother?*"

Pausing only a moment as she surprised herself that she actually had *not* been thinking about Rae as a brother all morning but as a *sister*, she finally answered, "Rae's out in our room. We've been up since Dad left for work."

"Still in P.J.s?" their mother asked rhetorically. "You haven't been *outside* in that, have you?"

"No!" Marie answered with a laugh. "We were just playing quietly in our room until you got up. We wanted to let you sleep in."

"Well *thank* you, sweetheart!" Laura croaked as she lit a cigarette. Turning in the seat toward the door she shouted, "*Ray!* Come on *in*, baby!"

"Rae's waiting to show you something in our room," Marie half lied, "but you can have your *coffee* first! No *rush!*"

Smiling as her eldest daughter poured a hot cup of coffee for her, she became suspicious of Marie's overly solicitous turn. "Is there something you wanted to *ask* for, Marie? Because I have to *tell* you, we don't have..."

"Oh, *no!*" Marie interrupted. "Well, I guess there is *one* thing, but it doesn't *cost* anything." Handing her mother the cup of warm black coffee, she waited while Laura sipped the cup and smoked her cigarette.

Taking another sip, she scowled at her. "Well? Spit it *out!*"

Marie was trying to stall until Laura finished her first cigarette and cup of coffee before dropping the bomb, but she wasn't cooperating. "Well, it's more of a *favor*. I just want to ask your permission to *do* something."

Now less curious and more frustrated with Marie for dragging it out and obviously trying to wait until she was more awake and amenable, Laura sighed. "*Marie*, just *ask* what you want and I'll tell you Yes or No! Stop trying to butter me *up!*"

Cornered into springing the question now or trying to stall more and agitate her mother into a foul mood, Marie sighed and held out her hand. "I can't *tell* you, I'll have to *show* you."

Putting down her half-smoked cigarette, Laura sighed and she stood up and tried to be less irritated. "*Alright*, sweetheart! *Show* me!"

The first thing Rachel saw was the door opening and Marie coming out into their room. She'd moved back a few steps so she wasn't visible from inside the camper with the door open to give her a moment more before Laura saw her. Trying her best to look cute, she swallowed her fear and smiled.

Laura's eyes adjusted to the darker room. Looking around once inside, she was about to ask Marie what it was she was supposed to see when she spotted Rae standing next to her sister's trunk looking for all the world like a six year old girl. Her heart skipped a beat as she looked Rae up and down in total shock.

"Marie Rose *Evans!*" she shouted as she turned to her eldest. "*What* did I tell you about dressing your brother up like a *girl* again!?"

"But *Mom!*" Marie defended herself. "Rae *asked* me! Rae wants to be a *girl* for Halloween!"

"*No*, he most certainly does *not!*" Laura shouted. "*No* little boy wants to be a *girl!* *Ever!* Not even for *Halloween!* You put him up to this!"

"*Mom?*" Rae spoke softly. "She *didn't*. I mean, the *outfit* was her idea, but *I'm* the one that told her what I *really* wanted to do for Halloween." She tried her best to plead with her eyes. "*Please?*"

Whipping her head back around to the little girl, Laura was near to apoplexy. "No, you *don't* want that!" she shouted. "I *told* you it was wrong and you're too *young* to know *what* you want! You will *never* leave the house looking like *that!*" Fuming nearly beyond control, she stormed up to Rae and quickly turned her to face away. Swinging quickly, she swatted Rae's butt harder than she'd intended and knocked Rae's knees into Marie's toy chest, causing her to collapse to the floor. "I want you out of that get-up *immediately*, mister!"

Turning her frustration on Marie, Laura pointed into the camper. "*March!* I don't want to hear a single *word* from you! You *got* that?"

Shocked at her mother's reaction, Marie nearly broke into tears as she ran into the camper in fear as her mother followed her in, slamming the door behind her.

Rachel was beyond devastated. For a few shining hours she really *had* been Marie's sister, but as she stood up slowly, she chastised herself. *I should have known it was too good to be true.* Silent tears rolled down her cheeks as she absently pulled the clip-on earrings off her ears and the wig off her head. Slipping out of the shoes easily, she found it difficult to unzip the dress before she finally managed to do it after several tries. Pulling the necklace over her head, she walked over to her clothes drawers and changed into her detested boy's clothes in a near fugue state, the entire time listening to her mother yell at Marie and try to blame her for the entire situation.

Collecting together Marie's clothes, she unceremoniously dropped them all in the laundry basket before laying down on her bed to openly cry until exhaustion claimed her. The rest of the day was a blur. She didn't play, she didn't talk, she didn't smile... she didn't even get up to eat. At some point her mother had come out to talk to her calmly, trying to make her believe that what Rae *thought* she liked she really *didn't*, but the words were a jumble of meaninglessness to Rae's shattered heart and she never responded. After her mother left her alone, she never spoke of it again, as though it had never happened. Marie didn't even try to talk to her when they went to bed.

The rest of the weekend passed with Rae barely aware of anything. She ate when she was made to, slept when told, and talked when forced to, but nothing more. Monday morning when the two children were walking to school was the most silent the two had ever been on the long walk to the bus stop. Neither spoke a word, even while waiting for the bus. When the bus finally arrived, for the first time Marie took a seat next to one of the girls that went to her school leaving Rae to sit alone. *It's all my fault.* Rae blamed herself. *Marie's in trouble, Mom won't believe me when I tell her it was my idea, and Marie will never forgive me. I wish I were dead.*

In class Rae was physically present, but heard nothing her teacher said. At recess she wandered aimlessly around the playground edge, trying to find any reason to exist at all and coming up blank. When the usual boys tried to chase her, she didn't even run and just let them beat her up, not even crying when one boy kicked her in the shin hard enough to make her bleed. She felt nothing, not even pain anymore. None of the playground monitors even bothered to find out what was going on and Rae told no one about it.

Within a week, Mrs. White was back to treating her as a 'trouble student' and relegating her to the corner desk away from the other students. So it went for weeks on end. When Halloween finally came, she dressed in the clown outfit her mother made for her, but took no joy in it. She didn't even ask for any of the candy she'd collected and never knew or cared what happened to it. By the time Thanksgiving rolled around, Rae was so drawn into herself that even when they traveled back to her grandparents' house she spent the entire time sitting silently on the couch not doing her makeup work as instructed, as everyone else had fun, talked, and enjoyed the holiday. She just sat and listened to the joy around her that she could never feel a part of again.

Weeks passed to months, and as Christmas approached she didn't even ask for anything. Nothing mattered anymore to the poor lost girl inside. Her parents took her to movies any boy would love, but she took no pleasure in them. After several stern lectures from her mother about appreciating the things they were doing for 'him', she learned to fake interest in things her parents forced her into, but inside the apathy grew to resentment, then anger, and finally hate for her own family.

Her relationship with Marie deteriorated into bickering, shouting, name-calling, and even fighting. When school let out for Christmas break, Rae spent all her time cutting out scraps of paper and gluing them together to make little furniture. She would glare at her mother anytime she dared ask what Rae was doing and refused to answer anything other than, "Making stuff." with barely restrained rage dripping from her words.

Christmas came and went with a very subdued mood over the family. Rae dutifully played with her boy toys only long enough to satisfy her parents, before putting them away hardly to be touched again... sometimes breaking them on purpose so she would have an excuse as to why she never played with her toys. When school came again, so too did huge amounts of snow through which the two had to walk twice a day. Rae's attitude to everyone around her worsened with each passing week, and by the time spring arrived, Rae was lost in a depression that no one could reach through. She was failing in school, her family life was miserable, and her temper was always kept just below a boil, lashing out at the slightest provocation.

It all came to a head one morning at school. She'd spent recess avoiding the boys and really needing to use the bathroom, but refusing to subject herself to further humiliation. When recess ended and the students returned, Rae raised her hand before Mrs. White even had a chance to talk.

"Yes, Ray?" she sighed.

"I need to use the *restroom*." Rae stated emptyly.

Frustrated with Rae's sour attitude, anti-social behavior, and inattentiveness in class, she shook her head. "You should have gone during *recess*!" she barked. "You can wait until *Lunch* break!" At that she turned back to the blackboard and ignored her.

Holding it for as long as possible, Rae was almost sweating with effort. When she started fidgeting in her seat Mrs. White yelled at her.

"Ray *Evans*! Stop disrupting this *class*!"

"I have to *go*!" Rae insisted, to no avail.

"Lunch is in an *hour*!" Mrs. White snapped. "Try paying attention to *class* until then!"

As her teacher went back to her topic, Rae tried to hold still and wait, but her bladder could take no more and she wet herself all over her seat. Humiliated beyond any consolation, Rae silently cried as tears streamed down her cheeks.

"*Gross!*" one of the boys shouted. "Ray *pissed* himself! What a *baby!*"

While the class all turned to look and laugh, Mrs. White stormed to the back of the room. "You *disgusting* little..." she growled. "*March* yourself down to the Office right *now!*"

Her classmates laughing at her, Rae stood and dejectedly walked out of the room and into the open air, starting toward the school Office. Approaching it, she was struck with a revelation. *I can't go to the Office! I'll be humiliated again!* she pondered. *I should just walk home... or maybe just take myself away so no one ever has to put up with me again.* Squaring her shoulders and deciding she would walk home, she marched right by the Office and out onto the street. Turning in the direction of her home, she began walking along the busy highway.

Ten minutes later she reached the place where she would need to cross the highway to go down the road to her house, but she just kept walking. *Why should I go home.* she mused. *Mom won't ever love me anyway, so why am I even trying? What's the point? They all hate me! It would make everyone happier if I just disappeared and never came back. That way Marie can get all the attention like she wants.* Continuing to walk, she saw the edge of town and made up her mind.

Even as she walked along the highway, big rig trucks would roar past her several times a minute. Each one brought to mind that it would just be so *easy* to just step out in front of one at the last second, her miserable life ended once and for all. The only thing that kept her from doing it was her instinctual will to survive and her fear of God's judgement. Before she reached the rail bridge that marked the edge of town, a car pulled to a stop

next to her. Rae's parents had taught her the dangers of taking rides from strangers, so she knew to *fear* this person, but she stopped walking anyway.

"Hey *kid*." the man said. "Where you *going*?"

"I'm walking *home*." Rae lied glumly. "I... I had an *accident* in school and I need to change my *clothes*."

Nodding the man opened the passenger door. "Well, hop *in* and I'll take you so you can get *changed*."

Rae knew she shouldn't. Gerald had been quite explicit about what strange men did to little boys if you got in their car. Sexual assault, beatings, slavery, murder... and Rae didn't care as she climbed into the seat. In fact, she was *hoping* the man was evil and she would finally be free of her torturous existence. *Nothing can be worse than my life as it is anyway*. she justified to herself. *Just a short time of more pain and it's finally over*. She even hoped that if she was murdered instead of killing herself that God wouldn't be mad at *her* for it.

To her disappointment, the man showed her a badge. "I'm officer Reynolds." he stated angrily as he put it away and turned the car around. "*First* of all, you shouldn't have gotten into my car without first finding out who I *was*. You're lucky I wasn't some *pervert* looking to *kidnap* you!"

Luck is a matter of opinion! Rae fumed inside herself as the officer drove her back into town.

"*Secondly*, you're too young to be walking home." he continued to lecture as he drove her back to school. "Your Principal called us when a custodian saw you leaving school and which way you went. You're *in* for it *now*, kid."

When they reached her school, he took her inside the Office and made her sit in the waiting area, the stink of her still damp pants filling the room. She

thought about trying to get away, but knew the man could easily outrun her. *What's the use. I'm doomed no matter what. I can't even get kidnapped right! I'm a useless failure!*

When Laura arrived, she was in near hysterics. Seeing Rae, she took her in her arms and hugged the stuffing out of her before shouting at her.

"Don't you *ever* scare me like that *again!*" Laura cried, obvious tear tracks on her cheeks.

After talking with the Principal, and getting Rae changed into clean pants and underwear, an agreement was hashed out. Rae would never be denied the use of the bathroom again, even in the middle of class, in exchange for the Evans' agreement to not file a complaint against the school or Mrs. White for publicly humiliating a six-year-old into running away from school.

Before being dismissed back to class, Mr. Hecht, the Principal, took out a paddle from his desk. "*Ray?* You know what *this* is for?"

Nodding, Rae gulped. "*Spanking?*" she replied weakly. She was quite used to the idea. Her Aunt Vera had a two-by-two inch board that hung from the wall with 'Marie' and 'Ray' written on it, as well as the names of all her cousins. She'd been told that years ago there'd been a predecessor board that had contained the names of all her aunts and uncles, as well as her own mother's name, so it was nothing new to be threatened with getting beaten on the rear. The paddle in fact would hurt *less* than the board, as it was light and had a big area to spread the impact.

"*Right.*" he confirmed in a low growl. "Your mom has given me written *permission* to use it on you as a disciplinary measure going forward." Walking around the desk, he towered over Rae and terrified her so badly she nearly wet herself again, thinking he was intent on using it to punish her now. "I hope I never have to *use* it, but don't for one *second* think I *won't.*" he threatened. "*Got it?*"

Rae nodded vigorously, her eyes wide as she had no doubt the man would follow through on his threat.

"Then get yourself back to class right *away!*" he ordered harshly.

Glumly returning to class, Rachel knew any hope of ever having a friend in this school had evaporated with her accident in class. No matter *what* the adults said, trying to downplay the embarrassment factor and telling her that the other kids would forget about it in a week, *she* knew that the incident would haunt her for as long as she went to school with anyone who knew about it. She wasn't wrong.

Even months later when school was near to ending for the year, she was still being called 'Ray Wetness' as a play on her name. Mrs. White, while being forced by the school to cater to Rae's weak bladder, blamed Rae for the chewing out she received from Mr. Hecht and took it out on the girl whenever she had the chance. The slightest infraction would result in her losing recess or getting extra work, even when other kids in the class did far worse things that went unpunished.

Losing recess was no big deal to Rae. In fact it was seen as a blessing as it left no chance for the other kids to make fun of her or beat her up for things she had no control over. The extra work was *less* pleasant, as each only served to take more and more of her time. Rae did her best, but as the year ended she barely had managed to pass on to the second grade with Ds. Rae was sure that Mrs. White had fudged her grades to *make* her pass, just to get *rid* of her. Not that it mattered to Rae anymore, the girl's hopes and dreams had been shattered by reality and she contented herself with her daydreams of another life. Believing that this one was to be an endless chain of misery, loneliness, pain, and despair, she would simply endure it until it would end and then beg God to give her another as the girl she always wanted to be with parents who actually loved *her*.

Meanwhile, Rae and Marie grew more and more distant. Marie, still blaming Rae for getting in trouble, she began looking on Rae as just a nuisance and distraction from her own efforts to find fun and friends in a place so far from where she'd grown up. For her part, Rae blamed Marie for getting her hopes up, only to see them dashed against the rocks of Laura's insistence that Rae was just 'going through a phase' and would soon be like all the other 'boys'. Their bickering and resentment got worse with each passing day.

One day in June, only days after school had ended for the summer, once they'd gotten up and had breakfast, Marie decided she'd had enough. They were in the middle of cleaning up the room when she looked at her depressed sibling. "Ray!" she growled. "When are you going to stop *moping* around here and *grow up*!" She'd stopped picking up and stood over Rae who was staring off into space again, even as she continued to pick up. "It's your *own* fault for being in *trouble* all the time!"

Rae was a thousand miles away and was irritated to have been yanked back to her grim reality by her sister. She'd been picking up, just like Marie... she was just doing it silently while thinking of her pretend life as a girl. "What!?" she barked.

"You are *such* a pain!" Marie barked back. "Stop *daydreaming* and come back down *here*! It's like living with a *zombie* and it's *embarrassing*! I want my *brother* back! *Jeeze*! It's almost like living *alone* sometimes!"

"Maybe you'd *like* living alone *better*!" Rae yelled as she frustratedly threw one of the toys she was putting away to the floor.

Flinching at the thrown toy, Marie knew how to get back at Rae for scaring her, even though she knew it wasn't done on purpose. Lowering her voice to almost a whisper, she grinned evilly. "At least *then* I wouldn't be waking up every morning to the *stink* of your wet *bed*!"

Cut to her heart, Rae wanted to cry but by then their mother had come in.

"What's going *on!*" Laura shouted in frustration at the children's bickering.

Marie pointed at Rae. "*He's* throwing things while *I'm* trying to pick up!"

Looking at Rae, Laura's expression turned from frustration to anger. "*Ray!*"

Turning toward her mother, Rae tried to counter Marie's lie of omission.

"But *Mom!* She..."

"There's no *excuse!*" Laura barked. Turning toward her eldest child, she lowered her tone to a softer one. "*Marie?* You're *done*. You can go *play*."

Turning back to her youngest, her tone turned harsh once more as she crossed her arms. "*Ray* will finish picking up for the *both* of you!"

While Marie smugly left to go outside, Rae was stunned speechless at the injustice of it all. "It's just *so* unfair!" she began. "I didn't do *anything*..."

Laura looked at her angry child. "*Oh?* You *didn't* throw any toys then?"

Knowing that her mother had her there, that she did in fact throw *a* toy, she knew then that no argument would sway her mother and that fighting the decree would just result in a *worse* punishment. Shoving her feelings down inside herself, Rae glumly began picking up the rest of the room as her mother returned to the camper, leaving her alone.

Marie's manipulation of the narrative, along with their mother not even giving Rae a chance to voice her side, especially after what Marie had said about her bed-wetting, left the girl fuming with repressed resentment. Picking up the room alone, she came at last to her sister's dollhouse, the one their parents had made by hand for Marie the last Christmas before moving. As almost an icon of her parents' love for their 'only' daughter, that along with the hand-made toy car garage that she'd gotten that same Christmas that she only played with out of a need to make her parents think she liked it, Rae set out to destroy both icons to masculinity and femininity.

I'll never get to be girl! she thought as she ripped up tacked down carpet in the tiny house. *Fine! They want me to be a boy? I'll be a boy... a mean little boy just like all the boys at school!* Stuffing her hated toy cars down the chimney, she then proceeded to slowly tear the lovingly built dollhouse apart. Slowly, she ripped the meticulously placed wallpaper off the little walls, each tear a memory of some time her sister or parents prevented her from being herself. Even as she destroyed the house, she cried at its loss and the loss of the childhood she would never be allowed to have. Once done, she proceeded to do the same with her car garage... breaking the ramps, the gas pumps at the little gas station at the bottom... *everything*.

Rae wasn't surprised when she was heavily punished for destroying Marie's dollhouse. She'd expected it. *If I'm gonna get punished for things I didn't even do, I might as well do things to get punished for.* she reasoned. Her poor grades on top of it meant she'd be punished all summer with extra work helping her father. Even on her seventh birthday she had work to do, a day that according to family tradition you didn't have to do *any* work.

Summer eventually led into the next school year, Rae happy to go back, if for no other reason than to escape the torment of her sister's happy life as compared to her own misery. Her new teacher, Mrs. Trent, was a happy lady who recognized Rae's above-average intellect, ignored the warnings in Rae's record, and encouraged her to use her mind with assignments geared to spur her active and vivid imagination and put it to good use. She even let Rae stay in at recess of her own accord as the kids were still making fun of her over the accident in class the previous year. After even just the first few days, Rae had found something to actually enjoy in school and in life.

It came as an extreme disappointment to her when barely a month into the school year, their parents told them that they would be moving back to their grandparents' house. Gerald had finally given up on making anything of the land they'd bought and was going back to work full time with the local National Guard. Just when it seemed like something *good* might be happening for Rae, as usual, it all came crashing down.

Chapter 5 - Another New Start

Rachel was truly *happy* for the first time since those few glorious hours she'd got to spend playing dollhouse with Marie while dressed as her sister. After moving back in with her grandparents, the rest of the year back in her old school had been miserable. Along with the return to the same boys who'd picked on her for *years*, her grades suffered as she returned to daydreaming in class. The gulf between Marie and herself had only intensified after Rae's act of vengeance.

Further, in her effort to push away the femininity that had only ever brought her misery and longing for a life she could never *have*, she demanded that everyone start calling her 'Raymond', that Rae was a 'little kid's name'. She'd even begun praying that God would just make her like a *normal* boy, to take *away* the feelings of being a girl inside. However, just like the prayers to become a *real* girl, nothing *changed*.

After the torturous year back at her grandparents' house, her family moved again, this time to a house in Carson City. This meant a chance for Rae to start over, but secretly she enjoyed the fact that it meant Marie would be torn away from her many friends once again. Envy of her sister's life had twisted into a kind of sick pleasure she got whenever Marie was as unhappy as she always was. *This* wasn't the cause of her new happiness, though.

"*Ray!*" Harmony shouted as she and Marie rode up on their bikes before stopping in front of their house. "Come *on!*"

Harmony was the girl who lived across the street from Rae and her family. Ostensibly *Marie's* friend as they were the same age and both in the same fifth grade class, the slightly heavy round-faced girl with blonde hair always went out of her way to include Rae in everything they did, often to Marie's chagrin. She also refused to call her 'Raymond', saying the name didn't 'fit' and Rae had stopped trying to correct her.

"Why do you have to *do* that?" Marie groused at her friend as the two came to a stop on the street between their houses. "Raymond is *such* a pain!"

"He is *not*!" Harmony countered. "OK, so *maybe* sometimes he is to *you*, I don't *live* with him, but *most* of the time he's pretty *cool*, for a *boy*! I wish I had a brother or sister to play with growing up!"

Rae heard Harmony's final statement as she walked her bike up to the two. "Ha! Having an older sister is *such* a pain, sometimes!" she opined.

Harmony laughed at Rae's comment as they got on their bikes. "You two are *so* much alike! Marie just said the *same* thing about *you*!"

"We are *not* alike!" the two siblings shouted at the same time, making them both laugh a little at the irony.

The three then headed off toward the giant dirt lot at the end of their road that, through use, had grown a series of bike trails around the huge hill of dirt at the center and a few across it. While the three raced around the trails on their bikes, Rae actually felt like one of the girls for a time, giggling and squealing just as her sister and Harmony were, only to feel guilty about it. Their time together *did* serve to patch up the siblings' relationship a little.

So it went for months. Even when Christmas came and she got boy presents, she tried her best to actually enjoy them. *After all*, she reasoned, *Harmony's a girl, but she likes bikes, and cars, and motorcycles, she even likes me!* One thing she *didn't* like that she was supposed to was Cub Scouts. Her parents *made* her join in an effort to get her to socialize with boys her age, Laura even becoming a Den Mother and Gerald a Scout Master. No matter how hard she tried to be like them however, the boys snubbed her, even in her own *home*.

Months rolled on and Rae soon found she was liking Harmony more than any other girl she'd ever known. Every time Harmony came over to play,

even if it was just to spend time with Marie, Rae found her heart fluttering with excitement just that she was *near*. When Valentine's Day came, she fully expected to return home with not a single Valentine from any of her classmates, even though she'd made one for all thirty-one of them. She even hand-made one for Virginia because the box of cards only had thirty. Unlike in previous years that had seen the same thing, this year she hardly cared. She'd made a special one just for Harmony and one back from her was the only Valentine she wanted.

When the three rode home from school on their bikes together the Monday after the weekend holiday, Rae listened as the two bragged to one another about all the Valentines they'd gotten from boys in their class.

"What about *you*, Ray?" Harmony asked with a grin, thinking she might make Rae blush. "How many girls gave *you* a Valentine this year?"

Shrugging, Rae grimaced embarrassedly. "*None*. Same as *every* year."

Shocked, Harmony skidded to a halt and waited for the two siblings to circle back around to stop next to her. "*None*?" she asked incredulously. "Not even generic *store-bought* ones? I thought you *had* to give Valentines to *everyone* in your class?"

"We *do*." Rae nodded glumly. "But boys *hate* giving other boys Valentines, especially to *me*, and *none* of the girls *like* me. So unless the teacher checks everybody's envelope, which they hardly *ever* do, or I complain, which I *never* do, nobody ever *gives* me any. It's the same *every* year."

"That's not *true*!" Marie countered as the three resumed biking home. "*Last* year, you got one from *every* member of your class! I *remember*!"

Rae rolled her eyes. "That's only because Miss *Bee* actually *checked*. I only *got* any after Miss Bee made a big *deal* out of the fact that I didn't *get* any and *made* them all make one for me. Most of the kids just took one of

theirs they got that they didn't like, scratched out the name, and wrote mine in. No *candy*, either. They had the candy taken off before I got 'em. Same *this* year, but Mr. Greyson didn't *check*."

"That's *awful!*" Harmony replied as they stopped at the crossing and waited for traffic to clear. "Why didn't you *tell* him?"

"The kids in class *hated* me for that last year!" Rae explained as they walked their bikes across the busy street. "Even though I *told* Miss Bee not to make a big *deal* out of it, the rest of the year I got picked on even *more...* even by the *girls*. So like *I'm* going to say *anything* this year?"

Marie rolled her eyes as they got back on their bikes and resumed riding home. "*Jeeze*, Ray! You make it sound like the end of the *world!*"

Though her feelings *were* hurt that she once more was unliked and snubbed by her classmates, Rae was starting to not only get used to it, but had come to *expect* it. Shrugging, she retorted, "Eh. Whado *I* care, anymore."

"Well, *I* care!" Harmony added as they approached their houses. "Kids sure can be *mean!* Meaner than *grownups* sometimes!" Turning to the opposite side of the street, she added, "See you after *homework*, Marie?"

"*Sure.*" Marie replied as she and Rae turned into their driveway.

Parking their bikes in the garage, the two came charging into the house as only eight and ten year-old children can, sounding to their mother as though an entire *group* of kids had invaded her home. "*Stop!*" Laura shouted as the two were headed through the kitchen. "Go *back* and try that *again!*"

Sighing, the two walked back to the door in the dining room that led to the garage, stopped, turned around, and walked back through the kitchen at a normal pace.

"*Better!*" Laura sighed. "Next time come *in* that way and you won't have to do it *over* again!"

"*Mom?*" Marie perked up as she stopped in the kitchen. "Can I put a few of my Valentines up on the *fridge?*"

"Two... *tops.*" her mother replied. Seeing Rae silently head into her room, she followed down the hallway until she reached the younger child's room. "How about *you, Ray?*" she smiled. "Any Valentines *you* want to put up?"

"*No.*" Rae answered glumly. Remembering, she pulled two more out that she didn't take to school with her. "*Here, though. This one's for you. Happy Valentine's Day, Mom.*"

Seeing the handcrafted Valentine card, Laura nearly cried at the sentiment. "I love you *too, baby!*" Hugging Rae and almost crushing the one Rae still held, Laura noticed it as she stepped back. "Is that for Marie?"

Rae made a face. "Don't be *gross*, Mom! Like I'd ever give *her* one? You don't see *her* giving *me* one do you? Not like I'd *want* one from her!"

"Who's it *for*, then?" Laura asked.

"*Harmony*, across the street." Rae said as she tried to hide a smile. "She's *nice* to me. Can I go over and *give* it to her before I start homework?"

Laura ruffled the girl's hair. "Oh, go *on* then!" Seeing Rae about to bolt running for the door, she admonished her before even a single step. "*Ah! Walk!* No running in the *house!*" Almost laughing as Rae bolted to a run as soon as she was out the door, she looked at the Valentine envelope on Rae's nightstand. Curious at its lack of fullness, she stepped into the room and opened the elaborate container to find it empty.

Rae approached Harmony's door, slowing and looking herself over in the reflection of the neighbor girl's screen door. Running her fingers through her hair in an attempt to look her best, she sighed. *Well, not exactly what I'd like to see... but I guess it's as good as it gets!* Taking a breath, she knocked on the door and waited.

Harmony opened the door and was surprised to see Rae. "*Oh! Did Marie need something?*"

"Not that I *know* of." Rae replied with her hands behind her back. Taking a breath again, she gathered her courage and forged ahead. "I came over to give you *this*." she stated shyly, as she brought the handmade Valentine out in front of her and handed it through the door to the stunned girl. "H-happy Valentine's Day!" Rae stuttered nervously.

Taking the card, Harmony looked at it in astonishment. It was beautifully made, other than the poor handwriting on it; an issue Rae struggled with. "*Th...thank you, Ray!*" Suddenly feeling uncomfortable that she didn't make one for Rae in return, especially in light of the knowledge that Rae hadn't gotten any from her classmates, she held it to her chest. "*I love it!*"

Smiling happily, she gulped and nodded shyly, waiting to see if Harmony would say anything else.

"*Well... I... I have to get back to my homework.*" she finally said as she stepped back from the door to close it.

"*Oh. OK.*" Rae responded as she realized there was not one for her in return. "*See you around, then?*" As the door closed, Rae slowly made her way back across the street and into her house. *I'm just glad she likes mine.* Rae sighed. *I don't even care that she didn't make me one!* Passing the kitchen, she heard her mother's voice.

"Ray?" Laura asked as she saw her pass by. "Come sit with me a moment?"

Thinking her mother was going to get on her about her grades, Rae sadly shuffled through the kitchen to sit at the dining room table with her mother. "Did I do something *wrong*? I wiped my feet at the *door*!"

"*No*, baby." Laura soothed her fears. "I noticed your valentine envelope was empty. Did you throw them all out at school?"

Shaking her head slowly, Rae sighed. "I didn't *get* any."

Surprised, Laura furrowed her brow. "But you told me that you *had* to give valentines to every kid in your *class*! I went out and bought that box of valentines just *for* it! Did you not *exchange* valentines today *after* all?"

Wishing her mother would just let the issue drop, Rae rolled her eyes. *Gee Mom! Rub it in why don't you!* "No, we did valentines exchange today."

Exasperated at having to pull the answers out like rotted teeth, Laura growled, "Well then where are *yours*?" She was answered with a shrug. "*Ray!* Are you trying to tell me that *none* of the kids in your class gave you a valentine when it was *required*? *No...* that's *impossible*! It would have to be some kind of *conspiracy* among the kids in your class for them *all* to disobey their teacher! Tell me what you *did* with them!"

Sighing and seeing her mother just wanted her to lie again so things would be easy, and willing to do so just to get her mother to drop the painful subject, Rae turned to her mother and told her what she wanted to hear. "I threw them *away*, OK?" Thinking about what her mother had said, that it had to be a conspiracy among her classmates to specifically *exclude* her, made sense though. Since she knew that she didn't get any, that left only her mother's explanation as the most probable reason. *Great! Thanks Mom! Before I just figured I wasn't popular! Now, thanks to you, I see that I'm actually actively hated to the point of kids conspiring to exclude me!* While she wanted to just cry about how hurt she was, instead she balled the feelings up and shoved them down to fester in silence.

"That was very *mean* of you!" Laura chided. "Your classmates worked hard to *give* those to you! I think after you get done with *homework* tonight, you need to spend some time in your room thinking about how what you do makes *other* people feel!"

Stunned that her mother was taking such a hard-line position on kids' valentine's cards, Rae's broken spirit just accepted the punishment without a word. While she was working on her homework in her room, Marie came in without even knocking.

"I heard what you told *Mom*. Did you *really* just throw them *away*, Ray?"

"*No*." Rae answered dispiritedly. "But Mom wouldn't *believe* me when I told her the *truth*, so I just told her what she wanted to *hear*. Now I'm in trouble for that, *too*! I can't *win*. I'm just a big *loser*!"

Hugging Rae from behind, Marie tried to console her depressed sibling. "If you *want*, I'll play in *here* with you! We can play *cars* or whatever."

Rolling her eyes, Rae was glad that she was facing away from her sister. "*That's* OK. I don't think Mom would allow it, *anyway*. It's supposed to be a *punishment*. Tell Harmony I said *hi*, OK?"

Shrugging, Marie left without saying another word. Rae tried to get back to work, but all she could think about was how different the day would have been if she'd been a girl. *Sure, I would've gotten a bunch of valentines from stupid boys, but girls give each other valentines all the time and it's OK! Boys only do it for other boys when they have to and not if they can get away with it!* Thinking about the valentine that she'd given Harmony, she smiled wistfully before frowning. *If I was a real girl... would it still be OK to like Harmony this much? I'm so confused!*

Weeks passed by and each time Rae would see Harmony on the morning ride to school or the afternoon ride home, she couldn't help but stare a little,

her heart doing little flip-flops in her chest each time, her hands getting sweaty, and giggling at everything the girl said. Rae knew she was feeling what they said *girls* felt when they liked a *boy*, she'd heard it often enough to know the symptoms, but it made her confused all over again. *I'm a girl, stuck in a boy's body, that likes other girls! I'm must just be crazy, that's all!*

Weeks turned to months, and Rae's feelings for Harmony only kept getting stronger. When school came close to coming to an end for the year, Rae had yet another setback. In addition to Cub Scouts, her parents had enrolled her in Little League. She knew girls could be *athletic*, Marie was on the softball team and quite good, but Rae wasn't the 'athlete girl' type... she was the 'sweet and delicate girl' type. Even as a pretend boy she was bad at the various sports they had to play during Gym class. More than once she'd been told she threw like a girl, which secretly Rae loved hearing even though it was supposed to be an insult.

Worse yet was how Marie had been treating her lately. It was bad enough that she refused to help Rae be a girl even *some* of the time anymore. Marie had become set on showing off to Rae that she was not only a better *girl* with better grades, more friends, and even joining the school band, but that she was better at doing *boy* things, too. She was better than Rae at sports and had taken to showing off the bike-riding skill that Rae lacked, often riding literal circles around Rae as they would ride to school and back again as she mocked Rae's riding skills. While Marie could ride hands-free, Rae was still struggling with riding one-handed, something Marie had mastered by the time she was seven.

One day while coming home from school, Marie's clarinet bungee-corded to her handlebars and Harmony riding alongside, Rae had finally managed to ride more than a few feet with one hand only. "*Hey!*" she shouted. "*Marie! Look! I got it! One hand! Look!*"

Marie scoffed, approaching their home. "*That's nothing!*" she belittled Rae's efforts, dropping both hands to her sides. "*When you can do this, I'll care!*"

As Marie both literally and figuratively laughed at Rae's accomplishment, Rae's heart sank as she resumed riding with both hands. Close to tears, she once more balled up the feelings and shoved them down inside to fester. *Boys don't cry!* she chided herself. *I have to be a boy! I have to be a boy! I hate Marie! I wish she'd crash!*

A moment later Marie's clarinet slipped loose of the cords holding it and fell sideways, yanking the handlebars hard to the left into the curb. The bike came to a complete stop almost instantly and tipped toward the sidewalk. Unable to brace her fall with her hands at her sides, Marie fell on her side just as her arm was coming up. Her entire weight and that of her bag and bike came down hard on her left arm as they all three heard the sickening pop of the bones in her forearm cracking.

Hearing Marie scream with pain and seeing her arm bent at an odd angle, Rae was momentarily overcome with panic. Then, shoving her feelings down inside her once more, she calmly shouted, "*Harmony!* Don't let her move! Try to keep her calm and still!" Running to the house and inside she said as calmly as possible, "*Mom?* Marie broke her *arm.*"

Laura was cutting vegetables at the sink when she heard Rae. "*What?*" At first she couldn't process what Rae was saying because the words and tone didn't match, thinking she must have misheard.

Completely devoid of emotion, Rae repeated herself calmly. "Marie was showing off riding with no hands, fell, and broke her arm."

Finally noticing the stream of wailing coming from outside, along with a stream of curse words vile enough to make a sailor blush, Laura dropped the knife in the sink and ran for the door. "*Marie!?*" With Rae leading the way, Laura followed her to Marie's prone form, Harmony trying to calm her best friend down and looking at Laura with near panic in her eyes. "*Ray!*" Laura shouted. "Call an *ambulance!*"

Rae immediately ran back to the house and quickly dialed the number that was next to the phone that she'd put there to get a merit badge in Cub Scouts. Dialing quickly, she calmly waited for an answer.

"Medic One. What's your emergency?" the voice said over the phone.

"My sister fell off her bike and broke her arm." Rae said slowly. All feelings such as the desire to run and comfort her sister or crying were shoved aside. Rae was almost shocked to find tears streaming down her face. After taking a moment to assure the dispatcher that she was serious, Rae gave her address and was told the ambulance would be there in less than ten minutes. After hanging up, she wiped her face quickly to hide the fact that she'd been crying and ran back to her mother and sister while Harmony was still standing next to them and crying. "The ambulance will be here in a few minutes." Rae informed her mother quickly.

"Thank you, baby!" Laura said as tears rolled down her cheeks as she tried to calm her daughter down. Marie wasn't cursing anymore, but she was *crying* as Laura tried to keep her still.

Rae moved to stand next to Harmony and was surprised when the older girl took her hand and gripped it like she would be blown away in the wind if she let go. The girl inside Rae was bawling and wanted desperately to force the tears out of Rae's eyes and hug Harmony for comfort, but she managed to just keep shoving the feelings down harder and harder until she felt nothing at all. *Boys don't cry!* she screamed to herself. *I'm supposed to be a boy and boys don't cry!* With everyone looking on, she was desperate to keep her tears at bay.

When they heard the ambulance approaching, Rae pried her hand free from Harmony's and ran out into the street to flag them down, pointing at where her sister was lying. After two men got her sister on a gurney and her mother was getting ready to climb in her car to follow them, Rae listened as Laura talked right past her.

"*Harmony?* Can you baby-sit Ray while I'm gone?"

It was bad enough that she said it to the girl that she liked, but she also said it in front of all the kids on the block that were listening. She heard a few snickers from the boys gathered around and felt she had to speak up for her own defense or face the bullying later.

"*Mom!*" Rae cried. "I was responsible enough to get you, call the ambulance, and stay calm the whole *time!* I don't think I need a *babysitter!*"

"*Please!* Don't *argue* with me, Ray!" Laura yelled as her nerves were at the breaking point. "Just *go* with Harmony and try to stay out of *trouble* for once!"

Watching her mother climb into their car to follow the departing ambulance, though she was hurt at the baseless accusation like she was some kind of juvenile delinquent, those feelings evaporated when Harmony took her hand again.

"Come *on*, Ray." Harmony said as she wiped tears from her cheeks with her free hand. Leading the two of them to her empty house, both of her parents still at work, she led Rae inside and sat down on the couch with her, never letting go of Rae's hand.

Chapter 6 - Hope Springs Eternal

Taking a cleansing breath, Harmony turned to the girl that appeared to her as a nearly nine-year-old boy sitting next to her on the couch. "Thanks for holding my *hand*, Ray. It helped a *lot*."

Rae blushed as she looked at their joined hands. "It's *OK*, Harmony. I don't mind, really. I just don't like Mom saying I need a *babysitter* like the two little girls she watches three days a week is all! I'm gonna be *nine* this summer!"

Letting go of Rae's hand, Harmony shook her head and smiled as she stood up. "*Moms!* For what it's *worth*, I don't think you need a babysitter! You were pretty *amazing*, really! You knew *just* what to do!"

Standing up with her, Rae continued to blush. "I just *read* a lot and watch TV. They do stuff like that all the time on shows. Actually I was *really* scared the whole *time!* Scared that Marie might *die!* Really, I'm *still* scared she might! I feel like it's all *my* fault."

"It is *not!*" Harmony chided her. "*You* didn't make her crash! It was an *accident*, that's all. *OK?* So no feeling *bad* about it!" Seeing Rae was unconvinced, she changed the subject. "You want a *snack?*" Realizing it sounded like something someone might say to a child that was being 'babysat', she stumbled to correct herself and giggled. "What I *mean* is... are you hungry after school and all that *excitement!* I know *I* am!"

Giggling along, Rachel nodded. "*Sure!*" Noticing she'd let her guard down and allowed the tiniest bit of Rachel to show through, she shoved her feelings back down inside her once more. Turning serious, she went silent as the tomb for several minutes while Harmony talked and made them sandwiches.

Eating together and talking about the accident while sitting at the breakfast bar in her kitchen, Harmony studied her young charge. Finishing a bite, she

cleared her throat. "If I *ask* you something, do you *promise* not to get *mad* or *upset*?"

Swallowing hard, Rae stopped eating and nodded seriously.

Standing up from the stool, Harmony paced a little before asking. "Why did you give me a *valentine*? You *had* to know I wouldn't have made one for *you*, right? I mean, you're not in my *class*, and you're *eight* and I'm *ten*, but it made me feel *bad* that I didn't make one for you, *too*."

"I... I didn't want to make you feel *bad*!" Rae insisted. "*Really!* I don't mind that you didn't have one for me!"

"So why did you make one for *me* then?" she asked again.

"Because I like you?" Rae answered simply.

"*Oh.*" Harmony pondered the answer. "So, you like... *like-like* me or just *like* me?"

Blushing and looking away, Rae couldn't answer. *Why should she like you? She likes boys... boys her own age... not little baby girls like you!*

Seeing Rae's reaction, Harmony nodded knowingly. "*Oh.* Well, if it *means* anything, I think you're pretty awesome, *too!*" Pausing, she walked back over to the breakfast bar and sat next to Rae and waited for her to look in her direction. When Rae finally did, Harmony smiled at her sweetly. "I think you're pretty *sweet!* *Most* boys are always *showing off* and *other* stupid junk to get a girl's attention, *ya know?* But *you* don't even *try* and I think that's kind of... well... I'm not sure *what* it's like, but I *like* it about you! It makes you fun to *play* with knowing you're not gonna do some stupid *stunt.*"

"Even when Marie was *teasing* you about not being able to ride no-hands, you were just proud of what you'd done, and ran off to *help* her after she

fell. *Most* boys would have *laughed* at her for showing off and getting hurt because of it." Pausing a moment, Harmony tried to let Rae down easy. "I *can't* be your *girlfriend* though. I'm not *allowed* to date yet... and I'm *pretty* sure that since *Marie* isn't allowed to date *either* that *you* can't *too*, right?"

Rae was in awe of the girl sitting beside her. *She's not repulsed by me? Me?* Seeing that Harmony was waiting for a reply, Rae silently nodded before deciding that shaking her head no was the more correct answer to Harmony's question.

"So, I guess it doesn't *matter* if we like each other or *not*..." Harmony pointed out with a smile. "...because our *parents* won't let us actually *do* things together like boyfriend-girlfriend *anyway*. At least for *now*, right?"

Hearing Harmony even *suggest* that she *did* like Rae back and that the only thing preventing her from wanting to be her girlfriend was their respective parents' rules, Rae was overcome with a joy and hope she hadn't had for half her life. Suddenly feeling very serious, she felt a need to tell Harmony just who it was that liked her. "*Harmony?* If I tell you a *secret*, do you *promise* not to tell *anyone*? I mean, not even *Marie*?"

Unsure, she furrowed her brow. "I don't *know*. What kind of secret *is* it?"

Looking away bashfully, she tried to calm her racing heart. "It... it's a secret... about *me*."

Curiosity overcoming her, she leaned in closer in a conspiratorial manner. "OK! I *promise*!" she almost whispered. "What *is* it?"

Almost able to feel the girl's body heat on her skin, Rachel suddenly felt lightheaded. *I can do this!* she told herself to try and convince herself that she actually could. Looking back at Harmony, she almost lost her nerve until she saw the eager compassion in the older girl's eyes. Taking a breath, she looked down at her snack. "Um... well..."

Now fairly burning with curiosity, Harmony moved a little closer in her seat, not even thinking about the fact that Rae liked her. Somehow it felt more like a secret told among girlfriends with a pinky-swear to seal the promise than sitting close to a boy. Seeing Rae stop and look away once more, she decided to reassure her. "*Hey! It's OK! I won't tell anyone!*"

Just as Harmony was about to further urge Rae to tell her the secret, the two heard the garage door open. Suddenly scooting apart like they were doing something naughty, the two resumed eating their snacks.

When Harmony's mother came in the living room and saw the two sitting alone, she thought at first that her daughter had brought a boy her own age into the house with no one else home. "*Harmony Beaks!*" she almost shouted. "Just *who* is this?"

Getting up, she smiled innocently at her mother. "Oh, *hi* Mom! It's just Ray from across the street. You know... *Marie's* brother?"

The woman looked at the boy and saw he was years younger than her daughter. Relaxing, she smiled at them. "*Sorry, dear! Where's Marie?*"

Her mother listened in shock as Harmony recounted the tale of the afternoon. "So Mrs. Evans asked me to watch Ray until she can get back, or Mr. Evans gets home. That was OK for me to *do*, right?"

Sighing, she nodded. "It was very *nice* of you to do that for her." Not wanting what she thought was an eight-year-old boy making a lot of noise around her house, she smiled again. "Why don't you take him across the street then? When you do a babysitting job, you *usually* do it in *their* house, *right?*"

Getting up and taking their snacks, Harmony smiled. "Sure *thing*, Mom! I'll just be at the Evans' until they come *back*, OK?"

The two entered Rae's home, Rachel nearly overcome with nerves. *I'm home alone... with a girl I really like... who knows I like her... and it could be hours before someone comes home!* Composing herself, she tried to focus on her words. "Um... wanna sit at the table and finish?" Rae offered. "The *snacks* I mean!"

Smiling mischievously, Harmony moved through the kitchen and sat at the table with the younger girl. Resuming eating, they sat in nervous silence until their sandwiches were gone. After a moment of awkward silence, she leaned over and bumped shoulders with Rae. "So, did you still wanna tell me your *secret*?" With a knowing glance and wink as Rae turned to her, Harmony giggled. "*Only* if you still *want* to, though."

"*Oh!*" Rachel flushed. "I *do*... I'm... I'm just... um... *scared*, I guess."

"You don't have to be *nervous*!" Harmony giggled once more. "I don't *bite*!" Pausing a moment she added, "Unless you ask *really* nice!"

Not sure what it meant, Rae gulped, sure it was some sort of flirting.

Harmony almost laughed at Rae's reaction. "You really *are* that sweet, *aren't* you?" Backing off some, she looked at Rae seriously. "OK, do you want to *wait* and tell me *another* time?"

"*No!*" Rae answered quickly. "I mean... I might never get another *chance* when Marie or someone else isn't *around*! I don't even mind that you're *babysitting* me really 'cuz it gives me a chance to *tell* you." Looking away once more, Rae took a deep breath in terror. "I'm just *really* scared that once I *tell* you you'll never want to be my friend... or anything *else*... ever *again*. You... you might even *hate* me for it!"

Taken aback, Harmony saw Rae was almost shivering with fear. Tapping the girl on the shoulder, Rae turned to face her and she smiled reassuringly. "*Ray*, I can't think of *anything* you could say that would make me *hate*

you!" Putting a hand over Rae's hand and scooping it into her own to hold hands once more, she swung their arms back and forth playfully. "Just go *slow* and say what you want to tell me. *Trust* me!"

Her heart hammering in her chest, Rae closed her eyes. *Just do it, Rachel!* she ordered herself. Letting her feelings really free for the first time in years, she almost cried at how sweet and patient Harmony was being. Looking up, Rae smiled genuinely and happily. "You know how you said I'm not like the boys? How they're always trying to show off and I'm different and couldn't figure out *how* I'm different?"

Harmony nodded as she noticed a subtle change in Rae. Nothing she could put her finger on at first, but eventually discerning that it was the way she was talking, much more relaxed and easy with her words. She actually liked it better than the usual way that 'Ray' talked, always studied care in her word choices and tone as though she were trying to carefully edit her speech.

"Well, there's a *reason* I'm not like the boys." She sighed as she prepared to expose her secret for the first time to someone that wasn't family. *Here goes! Harmony? I hope you're as wonderful as you seem!* "I'm *not*. Not *really*."

Confused, Harmony tilted her head like a confused puppy. "Not... *what?* Like the other *boys?*"

"I'm not *one* of them." she sighed. Seeing her answer didn't clarify things, she realized she was going to have to explain. "OK, so... you *know* you're a *girl*, right?" Seeing her nod confusedly, Rae continued. "OK... so *how* do you know? Is it just because everyone *tells* you you're a girl or would you *know* you were a girl even if no one *told* you so?"

"I guess because everyone *tells* me I am one." Harmony answered. "But I still don't understand what you're getting at."

"OK." Rae tried again. "Say you go to sleep tonight and when you wake up everyone tells you that you're a boy. Would that *make* you a boy?"

"No!" Harmony giggled. "I'd *still* be a girl! Even if everyone *said* I wasn't!"

"What if you had short hair and nothing but boy clothes in your drawers? *Still* a girl?" Seeing Harmony nod, she pressed one more step. "What if you went to the bathroom and saw you had *boy* bits?" Rae added. "Would you *still* know you're really supposed to be a girl?"

Taken by surprise, Harmony puzzled over the question a moment. "Um, I *guess* I would. I mean, I'd still be *me*... I'd still like *girl* things like clothes, makeup..." She stopped suddenly and looked at Rae as though she was seeing her for the first time. "*Ray*? Are you saying you're really a *girl*?"

Near to tears, she barely held them back as she nodded. "I... I've *always* known I'm a girl... but I got *born* wrong and have boy bits so everyone *treats* me like a stupid *boy*!" Calming herself as she held most of the tears back, only a few managing to leak away down her face, Rachel took a breath before continuing. "I have to *pretend* to be a boy almost *all* the time or else everyone will *hate* me! But... but when I do things with *you*... I act more like *myself* than anyone has ever *seen*! *Marie* and I used to play *dollhouse* and all *sorts* of fun games together when we were little, but she doesn't like me to be a *girl* anymore and just wants me to be a *boy* all the time now. So I haven't *really* had someone I could be *me* with until... well... until I met *you*. For *some* reason, I... I have a hard time *pretending* to not be myself around *you*."

Taking in the awesome revelation Rae had just shared with her, Harmony examined the past nine months of knowing the person in front of her. "Well..." she began. "It certainly explains a *lot* about how you're *different*. Looking *back*, I can really *see* that playing with you has been just like playing with another *girl* and not a boy at *all*... like you were *Marie's* little *sister* and not her *brother*." Her thoughts shifting another direction, she

gulped before continuing. "So, you see yourself as a girl like *me*, and you still like... *like-like* me? As a *girl*?"

Nodding shyly, Rae's cheeks flushed with embarrassed attraction. "I don't understand *why* I don't like boys like the other girls do, but I know I *don't*. At *first* I thought I'd probably *grow* to like them the way *Marie* did. *She* used to think boys were stupid *too*, but when she turned eight she started *liking* them, so I thought it would just take time for me to get older like *her*. But I'm almost *nine* now and I *still* don't like boys and I started noticing *girls* the way they say I'm *supposed* to as a boy, but I don't *like* girls like a *boy*, I like them as a *girl* and... it's *really confusing*!"

Harmony nodded in understanding. "I'll *bet*!" Taking her own turn to blush as she fully comprehended the situation, that Rae liked her the way she liked some of the boys she went to school with, she looked at Rae again with a grin and giggled. "It's *funny*, but when I'm not *looking* at you when you're talking, I *totally* hear a *girl*, but when I *look* at you all I see is 'Ray, Marie's brother'. It's sorta *funny* if you think about it!"

Nodding, her heart sank as she held back her tears. "I *know*. I'm an *ugly* girl."

The smile Harmony had melted as she reached out and took Rae's hand once more. "No! Not like *that*! I mean you have a boy's *haircut*, you're dressed in boy *clothes*, and you still *look* like the person I've known as 'Ray' for the last year, so it's sorta weird and *funny* to hear you talk like... well... like a *girl*! Not funny like '*Ha! Ha!*' funny, but funny like '*that's sorta weird!*' funny!"

Looking at Harmony as she elaborated on her meaning, Rae smiled weakly and giggled. "I guess it *is* a little! *Sorry*! I *know* I just look like a stupid *boy* like this." She picked disgustedly at her shirt.

Biting her lower lip, Harmony looked slyly at Rae. "Do you ever... um... like... *dress* like a girl?"

Rae shook her head sadly. "Not *anymore*. I *used* to when Marie and I were *little*, but I haven't worn any of Marie's clothes since..." Her voice trailed off as she remembered that last time playing dolls before her mother ended it all. "Not since I was *six*. Marie won't *let* me anymore."

Whispering conspiratorially again, Harmony grinned. "You mean you *never* sneaked into her room and just *borrowed* some without asking?"

Shocked, Rae shook her head. "I just *couldn't*! I'd get *caught* and it would be even *worse* than it is!"

"Just *asking*." Harmony said innocently. Changing the subject, she had another thought. "So, if you think you're *really* a girl, do you have a *girl* name? I mean, a name you like... call *yourself*?"

Nodding with a slight smile, Rae looked down at the floor. "Rachel Michelle... or Rae with an E for short. It's what Mom and Daddy would have named me if I'd been born as a *real* girl."

It was Harmony's turn to shake her head. "Well, after *really* getting to talk to you, I think you really *are* a real girl! It's *nice* to talk to the *real* you! You should do it more *often*! I like *Rachel* even more than *Raymond*, and I already liked Raymond a *lot*!"

Giggling with a blush, Rae's smile quickly disappeared. "It's no *good*, though. I have a *boy* body and someday it'll grow up into an ugly *man's* body. No matter *what* grownups say, it doesn't *matter* what's on my *insides*, all that counts is what's on my *outsides*. No one will *ever* see me as a girl. I guess maybe not even *you*. Also my mom won't *let* me be girly in *any* way. That's why I have to do those stupid *Cub Scouts* and *Little League*. She wants me to *act* like the boys. I'm no *good* at being a boy though. Even *Marie* is better at doing boy stuff than I am. And *nobody* likes '*Raymond*' 'cuz he's a big *phony* and everyone can *tell*!"

"It's *weird* hearing you talk about *Raymond* like he's a different *person*!"

"In a way he *is*, I guess." Rae admitted. "I sort of have to turn Raymond *on* and *pretend* to be him, like a *play*. I think I might be a little *crazy*! When I hide being *myself*, I just sort of stuff all my feelings in a box in my heart or *Raymond* might cry or something, and *boys* can't *cry*."

With one swift move, Harmony got up, helped Rae to her feet, and gave her a hug. A little shocked and unsure, it took Rae a moment before she could relax into it like just any other girl. "You can cry in front of me anytime you *want* Rachel!" Harmony said soothingly. "Even if you're pretending to be *Raymond*. I won't mind!"

Almost as if on cue, Rae started to weep quietly. "I was *so* scared when Marie got hurt! I just wanted to run to her and *hug* her!"

"You're a *good* little sister, Rachel." Harmony soothed the crying girl. Once she stopped crying, Harmony held Rae at arm's length and looked at her. "You know, if you had longer *hair*, and *dressed* better, I think you would be a *pretty* little girl!"

Sniffing, Rae was both touched and hurt by Harmony's intended compliment. *Great! She still just sees me as a little girl! I guess it's better than her thinking of me as just a little boy though.* Sighing she grabbed a tissue from the box on the table and wiped her eyes dry. "*Thanks.*"

The two stood companionably in the kitchen, eventually making their way into the living room to sit next to one another and watch TV to get their minds off of Marie's injury and Rae's problems. At some point Harmony took Rae's hand once more and the two looked at one another knowingly before turning back to the show they'd been watching.

Hours later, they both heard a car pull into the garage. Getting up and making her way to the door to the garage, Harmony opened it just as Laura was

leading Marie toward it. Seeing the cast on Marie's arm, Harmony's eyes went wide. "*Marie! Are you OK?*"

"*No!*" Marie barked at her friend as the three entered the house. "*My arm is broken and I won't get this stupid cast off until the end of summer! That means no swimming, no softball, no bike-riding... My summer is ruined and it's all stupid Raymond's fault!*"

Putting her purse on the table, Laura shook her head. "*Marie, we talked about this at the hospital! It's not his fault you broke your arm, is it? Whose fault is it?*"

Glumly looking down at the floor as she dropped into a chair at the kitchen table, Marie reluctantly answered. "*Mine... for not being safe.*"

"*Right!*" Laura nodded as she examined the ruined vegetables in the sink. "*Speaking of Raymond, where is he? His room?*"

Harmony shook her head, her blonde hair flitting over her shoulders. "*Ra... Rae was really upset about Marie after you left, so I just let h... him watch some TV to get his mind off Marie getting hurt. Was that OK?*" She had to actually focus hard to not think of Rae as a girl now.

Looking toward the living room, Laura spotted Rae peeking around the corner shyly. "*It was fine, Harmony. Ray? Come here, baby.*"

Making her way into the kitchen, Rae glanced over at Marie who was staring daggers at her. Luckily Harmony was there and smiling at her, which helped as she almost fell in her mother's arms. "*I was really scared for Marie, Mom! I... I didn't feel it until after you left! It really is my fault she got hurt! I was showing off riding with one hand and...*"

Hugging Rae low as the girl's head barely came up to her hip, Laura ran her fingers through Rae's hair to comfort her. "*No, baby. It's not your fault! It's*

just something that *happened*." Looking over at Marie, she saw the girl glaring at Rae angrily. "*Right, Marie?*"

Not answering at first, Marie fumed at her situation. Finally, she sighed and gave in to her mother's look that was demanding she reassure Rae. "*Yeah. It's not your fault... Raymond.*" Her tone betrayed her real opinion as she spoke Rae's name like the insult she knew it was to the girl.

"*Alright, mister!*" Laura said in a light tone. "It's already getting close to dinner time and *you* have homework to do! *Oh...* and you left your bikes on the side of the street! You better get them in the *garage* before your *dad* comes home!"

"I'll get *Marie's* bike, Mrs. Evans!" Harmony offered. "I have to get home now, *anyway.*" Turning to Marie, she walked over and gave the glum girl a hug. "I hope you feel better *soon*, Marie."

Returning her best friend's hug with her working arm, Marie sighed. "*Thanks, Harm... sorry you had to watch my brother all afternoon!*"

Laura interrupted their parting briefly. "*Oh!* That *reminds* me. How much do I *owe* you, Harmony?"

Turning to her two friends' mother, Harmony smiled. "It's *fine*, Mrs. Evans! We just sat and watched *TV*, so I'd feel bad getting *paid* for it!" Turning back to Marie she mouthed, "*Call me! We need to talk!*" before heading for the front door where Rae was waiting.

Walking over to where all three had abandoned their bikes earlier, Rae sighed. "Thanks for making it not seem like *babysitting!*"

"Well, it *really* wasn't!" Harmony said through a smile. "It was more like just hanging *out* like I do with *Marie* all the time!" Pausing a moment, she added, "I... I'm sorry I almost called you *Rachel* in front of your *mom!* I'm

gonna have to get used to keeping this a *secret*! Are you *sure* I can't talk to *Marie* about it? I'm sure *she'd* understand and maybe we can both *help* you somehow!"

Picking up her bike as Harmony picked up Marie's, Rae shook her head. "Marie already *hates* me for getting her arm broke, and she's already in a little trouble for blaming *me*. If she knew I told you about *Rachel*, she'd tell *Mom* I told you I'm a girl just to get *me* in trouble so she'd look *good* again by *comparison*."

Stopping short, Harmony looked at Rae sternly. "*First* of all, I already *told* you, and so did your mom, the accident was *not* your fault! *Secondly*, you haven't done anything *wrong*, right? So just how is Marie telling your mom going to get you in *trouble*?"

"Mom thinks me just *feeling* like a girl is bad." Rae explained as she stopped near Harmony. "Like it's *my* fault I can't just be a normal boy like she *wants* me to be. I pray to be normal like *every* night! I *hate* feeling like a girl with a boy body! I just wish God would either fix my *head* so I could be a normal *boy* or my *body* so I could be a normal *girl*. Just one or the *other*! This being *neither* is driving me *crazy*!" The two resumed walking the bikes toward the garage, Rae shaking her head in frustration.

"Still, I don't think Marie would rat you out to your *mom*!" Harmony offered quietly as she parked Marie's bike in front of their mother's car.

"*Please*, Harmony? You *promised*!"

Shrugging, Harmony let the matter drop for the time being. "*OK*."

Parking her own bike in front of where her father's car would pull in, Rae sighed. "Thanks for helping me with the bikes, Harmony. You really didn't *have* to. Oh, and don't forget *yours*. It's still *out* there." Lowering her voice she added, "And thanks for not *hating* me!"

It was Harmony's turn to blush as she walked up to Rae. "I don't think I could *ever* hate you, *Rachel!*" she whispered in the smaller girl's ear as she bent down slightly to hug her. "I'm pretty sure that I *like*-like you too much to ever *hate* you!" Giving the girl a knowing look, Harmony giggled before running out of the garage. "*Bye!*"

Rae stood in stunned silence for a moment contemplating the girl's parting comment. "She... she *likes* me?"

Chapter 7 - The Bitter and the Sweet

For the next few months, Rae's attitude was very much improved. While she was still in the doghouse with Marie over her broken arm, especially when they went up to the lake and Marie had to have a big ugly plastic bag over her arm to protect the cast from the water, her friendship with Harmony had grown by leaps and bounds. She even managed to improve her grades before the school year ended. It was marred only by the continued efforts by her parents to turn her into a boy through Cub Scouts and Little League.

Baseball turned out to be worse than Rae had even imagined it could be. Her athletic skills being poor, along with her relatively small size and thin frame, she was relegated to one of the Farm Teams where kids were so bad they didn't even have pitchers. They only had pitching machines that scared the life out of Rae every time she had to go up to bat, ensuring she would never get a hit. Even worse was her *coach*. Fred Hughes had been a baseball star through college, but failed to get a Minor League contract afterwards. Becoming a Little League coach, he took his frustrations out on his players, yelling at them and talking down to them for every mistake, as though they were actually professional players that were purposefully playing as bad as Farm Team Little Leaguers just to *irritate* him.

Rae, he seemed to actively *hate*. Easily the worst player on his team, she always shied away from the ball unless it was a slow grounder. Her only saving grace was that she had a good arm for distance throwing and was relatively accurate with where the ball would go once thrown, even in a wind. Still, he was loath to put her on the roster and 'accidentally' left her off the line-up repeatedly, until warned that if he did it again his team would forfeit any game that all players were not included.

For *her* part, Rae hated Mr. Hughes just as much, and her teammates even *more* so. Quite often she was left sitting on the bench getting cups full of sunflower seed shells and spit thrown at her by the boys on her own team when no one was looking. It was even worse when Mr. Hughes was forced

to put her in the line-up. If she didn't play, at least her teammates just ridiculed or ignored her. If she was *made* to play, her team actively blamed her when they would inevitably lose, which was hardly fair as they lost most of the time, even games she *didn't* play. Rae was without a doubt, the *worst* player, on the *worst* team, in the *worst* league in all of Northern Nevada, and her team never let her forget it for a *moment*.

Her father Gerald, though trying to be supportive, wasn't any help. Insisting that they spend every Saturday at the park practicing to improve Rae's skills only resulted in Rae dreading the time with her father, forced to do something she *hated*. It wasn't as bad with Cub Scouts. Rae actually *enjoyed* spending time with her daddy there as the things they did weren't really *boy* things more than just *fun* things.

Eventually summer ended and school was back in session following Labor Day, and Rae started the fourth grade on a good note. She liked her teacher and Mrs. Taylor liked Rae for being the best-behaved 'boy' in her class. The morning of the second day of school though, Rae was walking with Marie and Harmony to the bike racks as usual when James, a much bigger kid who had played on Rae's team over the summer, spotted them.

"Well lookie *here!*" he sneered. "Why am I *not* surprised? Little *Ray-chle* hanging out with the *other* girls! Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Marie saw Rae come to a dead stop in terror as she looked right at her and then Harmony, able to tell right away that Rae thought she had blabbed her secret out of spite and now it had gotten all over school. "Cram it, *James!*" Marie defended Rae. "You think you're just *so* funny making up *lies* like that! How would *you* like it if I started calling you *Jamie?*"

Seeing the eleven-year-old girl defend Rae, he sized her up and determined she was no threat. "Go ahead and *try*, girly and see what *happens!*"

Then Harmony stepped up. "You wanna *make* something of it, *Jamie?*"

James' eyes went wide at the sight of Harmony, a girl almost as big as he was, standing up for Rae and forcing him to redirect his tactics. "Oh *yeah?* So the kid needs *girls* to protect him? That just proves my *point!* He's just a sniveling little *girl* that shouldn't be allowed to *play* baseball! Maybe he can go play *softball* with you *girls!*"

Rae was touched that Marie and Harmony were standing up for her, but knew from experience that it wouldn't help. "Just let it *go*, Marie. Come on, let's go lock up our bikes and get to class." Walking past James with an air of dignity, the three girls locked their bikes to the rack and the two older girls walked Rae to her class as James followed, unwilling to push the point while Harmony was around. Getting close to her classroom door, Rae spoke in hushed tones to her sister and Harmony. "I know you two are trying to *help*, but..." She glanced back over her shoulder at the boy following them. "It won't do any *good*. He'll just wait until you two aren't *around* and it'll be even *worse*, now."

Harmony shook her head. "Rae... we aren't *about* to just stand by and let some *bully* call you names and not *say* anything! *Right*, Marie?"

Rae looked at her sister and saw the faintest hint of hesitation in her reply.

"*N-no!*" she finally agreed. "You're my little *brother* and I won't let *anyone* pick on you if *I* can help it!"

Sighing as they reached her door, Rae shook her head. "Well, thanks for *trying* to stick up for me anyway."

Oddly enough, James avoided Rae all the rest of that day, which just made her paranoid about what he was planning. Sure enough, when Rae went to go to her bike after school, James was there waiting. Worse yet, Marie and Harmony *weren't*. Trying to just ignore him, Rae started toward her bike and just kept looking at the ground.

"Here comes *Rachel!*" he taunted her. "So where's your *girlfriends?* Shouldn't you be off painting your *nails* with them?"

Intent to not let him see what she was feeling, that she'd like nothing better than to be doing just that, Rae just crouched down next to her bike and started putting in the combination to her lock as fast as she could without saying a word.

"*Hey!*" James shouted at her as he approached her. "I'm *talking* to you, *sissy-girl!* I asked you a *question!* What's the *matter?* Too *stupid* to understand *English?*" Standing over her, he pushed her shoulder down, making Rae mess up the combination.

Standing quickly, Rae was fuming mad. "What do you *want* from me, James! You want me to admit I'm bad at baseball? *Fine!* I *suck* at baseball! It's a *stupid* game anyway! I *never* wanted to play it! My *Dad* made me! *There!* Are you *happy?!*" As she yelled, she kept stepping toward him, making him back off from her tirade. Finally turning away from him with a huff, she started to walk back to her bike when she suddenly felt a sharp pain in the back of her head and got a dizzy feeling before watching the ground rush toward her face.

The next thing she knew, fists and feet were pummeling her as she lay there trying to protect her face and belly. Using her high pain tolerance to block the hurt of the blows only seemed to make him more furious that his blows weren't making her cry.

Just as suddenly, the punching and kicking stopped and Rae was vaguely aware of someone yelling, "Get your hands *off* him!" Looking up, she saw Marie standing between herself and James. A moment later the Sun was blotted out from her eyes as Harmony's face came into view.

"*Rae?* Rae, are you *OK?*" her friend asked with a seriously concerned look on her face.

Nodding as she tried to get up on her own, she accepted help from Harmony to get back up as her sister continued to berate James. Meanwhile a circle of kids stood around yelling, "Fight! Fight! Fight!" Finally on her feet, she gently pried loose of Harmony's grasp before stepping around Marie to confront James directly, causing her sister's tirade to halt mid-insult.

"So? Does that make you feel *better*?" Rae said snidely. "Hitting a... a kid almost half your size from *behind*? Feel like a big *man* now, you... you *coward*!" Marie almost had to restrain Rae to keep her from slapping James just as the groundskeeper came running up.

"What's going *on* here?" the large man demanded.

All the kids who had a moment earlier been egging the fight on began to disperse before getting caught up in the aftermath. The only thing that prevented James from escaping was the big hand grasping his backpack to prevent his flight.

"Lemme *go*!" he demanded. "I didn't do *anything*! That twerp *started* it!"

That evening, Rae lay in her bed crying. Not only did James blame her for the fight, three of his friends corroborated his lie and Marie and Harmony, the only ones to take Rae's side, were not listened to because they had to admit they weren't there when the fight started. The fact that James didn't have a scratch on him and Rae was black and blue with bruises didn't seem to matter. In the end it came down to the fact that Rae had a record of being a 'trouble student' and James had friends to lie for him. Rae was suspended for a day for fighting, but the deepest cut was when her mother took the bully's side and grounded Rae for two weeks.

Hearing a soft knock on the doorframe, Rae rolled over to see Marie standing in her doorway with a soft expression of pity. "I... I tried to tell Mom what really happened, but she just told me to stay out of it, that you had to take responsibility for your own actions. I'm *sorry*, Ray. It's all *my* fault!"

Rae just sighed and sniffed, trying to hold back the tears while her sister was looking at her. "Nothing to be done about it *now*, Marie... thanks *anyway*."

Stepping gently into her room, Marie gulped as she looked at the bruise under Rae's eye. Lowering her voice, she almost whispered, "Listen, I was talking with Harmony. I... I think she *knows* about you. I mean, your old 'girl' thing, I mean! That stupid James lucked into calling you *Rachel* of all things, and when Harm and I were talking while Mom was bawling you out for getting suspended, *she* called you Rachel! She tried to play it off like it was a *mistake*, but it was like she *knew*! I think she almost called you *she* more than *once*!"

"I think *most* of the kids at school called me *Rachel* at *some* point in time today." Rae tried to deflect her sister's suspicions. "That's why the school thinks *I* started the fight, because he called me *Rachel*. Why should *Harmony* be any different?"

"*Ray*! Not *Harmony*!" Marie defended her friend. "She's your *friend*! Probably your only *real* one besides *me*!"

Sitting up hopefully, Rae blinked back tears. "So... so you're my friend again, then?"

Rolling her eyes, Marie stood with her hands on her hips. "Of *course* you're my friend, Ray! I'm your *sister*!"

"But all summer you *hated* me!" Rae pointed out as she lay back on her bed. "You... you think it's *my* fault you broke your arm."

Sighing, Marie looked at the floor. "I... I was wrong about that. I'm sorry, Ray. *Really*!"

Seeing true contrition in her sister's apology, Rae stood up and gave her sister a hug. "It's *OK*, Marie." Looking toward her door, she then whispered

in Marie's ear. "And it's not my 'old girl thing', Marie. I *still* feel like Rachel and... and I *told* Harmony about it."

Shocked, Marie stood back and gasped. "Ray!" she whispered. "Ray, you *shouldn't* have *done* that! *When?*"

Sitting on her bed, Rae shrugged. "Um... the day you broke your *arm?*" Seeing her sister's eyes grow even wider, she preempted Marie's feelings of betrayal. "I *swore* her to secrecy Marie! She couldn't even tell *you*. After I *told* her, she said I should let her tell you she knew and she *argued* for it, but you were so *mad* at me then that I was scared you'd use it *against* me and *made* her promise not to tell you. So don't blame *her*, OK?"

Slowly absorbing the information, Marie finally calmed down and nodded. "*Alright*. I hate to *say* it, but you might have been *right*. At the *time*, I *might* have. Mom was *really* riding me anytime I complained about the cast and I might have done almost *anything* to make her not mad at *me* anymore." Sitting next to Rae, she looked over at her and smiled weakly before getting to the other point. "So, you *still* think you're a girl?"

Nodding and then shrugging, Rae looked away. "I... I don't think it'll *ever* go away, Marie. It's just the way I *am*. I guess I'm just supposed to find a way to *deal* with it and go through life *pretending* it's not always there... *pretending* to be someone I'm *not* just to get *along*."

Suddenly, the two were interrupted by the voice of their mother. "*Marie?* Are you talking to your *brother?* He's being *punished* and unless you want to *join* him, you better *not* be!"

Sneaking out before their mother let her ire spill over on her, Marie took one last look at Rae looking pitiful and broken as she sat on her bed. "Love you... *Rachel*." she whispered before retreating to her own room.

After Rae returned to school, the teasing didn't let up. She ignored it in an effort to diminish interest, but the joke only lost popularity, and some even began to pity her plight, when her teacher Mrs. Taylor caught wind of it and did a lesson on bullying. She knew Rae personally because her son Bill had been in Rae's Cub Scout Den the year before when Laura was Den Mother. Unlike her *own* mother, Mrs. Taylor actually *believed* Rae's version of events, and told her one day during recess that she thought Rae was treated unfairly. Even though there was nothing she could *do* about it, Rae thanked Mrs. Taylor for showing her that at least *one* grownup understood.

Over the next months, Rae was blown away at how Marie and Harmony *both* went out of their way to be nice, include her in their games, and treat her just like one of the girls whenever no one else was around. They even called her Rachel and referred to her as 'she' and 'her' most of the time they were alone together. They had effectively made her an 'honorary girl' and Rae was able to be happy most of the time.

The following summer Rae turned ten and even managed to enjoy the baseball her parents made her take again, as Harmony and Marie started cheering her on as the 'secret girl' on the all-boy team. She didn't *play* much better than the previous year, but she *did* have fun. The only dark spot on the month was when Marie had a slumber party on her twelfth birthday and Rae had to stay in her room the entire time, forced to listen to a room full of girls having fun while she cried in envy. In spite of this sad evening, Rae had finally begun to have hope for the future.

Nothing lasts forever, though. Tragedy struck shortly after Marie's birthday when Gerald's older brother Harry received the worst news possible for a parent. His fifteen-year-old daughter had been raped and murdered. The other 'Evans family' lived only a few miles from Rae's house, so it was only natural that Laura and Gerald would spend much of their time consoling the stricken family. Within weeks however, their parents informed Rae and Marie that by the end of August they would be moving to Sparks; a city adjacent to Reno and thirty-five miles north.

With barely any time to say goodbye to Harmony, and never *alone*, Rae was *beyond* devastated. Having first lost her cousin to the worst fate her imagination could conjure, a fate she'd once wished for *herself*, she was going to be torn from the best friend she'd ever had and who she'd been falling more and more in love with each day. By the time the disastrous news was broken, Rae had only just worked up the nerve to re-open the question of becoming Harmony's girlfriend since the wonderful girl across the street was now allowed to date. She'd only been waiting for the first opportunity alone to ask. Now sure it was never to be, she thought God must have been punishing her for failing to become a boy, or for daring to hope that a girl could love her back as herself.

To Rae's surprise, Marie convinced her parents to let Harmony have a sleepover at their new house the weekend before school started. Even *more* surprising was that it wouldn't be in the house *at all*, but in the loft over the garage. The most unbelievable part though was that Rae would be allowed to join the two girls. The first moment she had, Rae cornered Marie in the older sibling's room.

"*Marie!* How on *Earth* did you *ever* convince Mom to let *me* be part of your *sleepover*?" she said in total shock.

Grinning slyly, Marie looked so proud of herself Rae thought she might burst. "I just told her that Harmony was just as much *your* best friend as she was *mine*, then laid on the guilt about ripping you away from the *only* real friend you've ever *had*, besides *me* of course! Besides, you're still only *ten*, so Mom sees it as completely harmless. You're still just a little *kid* as far as *she* can see!"

Rae threw her arms around Marie and hugged her as tight as she could. "I *love* you Marie! Thank you *so* much!"

Prying her arms free, Marie nearly laughed at how happy Rae was. "*Hey!* I saw how torn up you were that you couldn't be part of my *slumber* party,

though I'm *still* convinced you wouldn't have had any fun with a bunch of girls two years *older* than you that would have just looked at you like you were a little *boy!*"

Blushing, Rae was almost giddy. "*Still*, I don't know how to thank you *enough!*"

Laughing lightly, Marie pointed toward the garage. "*You* get to haul all the stuff up into the loft and clean up *afterwards!*"

"*Deal!*" Rae giggled back.

Turning serious, Marie looked directly in Rae's hazel eyes. "Rae... I have to *ask*. You *do* know this is sort of a 'goodbye' sleepover, *right?*"

Nodding solemnly, Rae still couldn't help but smile slightly. "I don't *care!*" Leaning in close she whispered, "I'm gonna ask Harmony to be my *girlfriend...* and for me to be *hers!*"

"*Rae!*" Marie whispered a yell. "*Why?* We're probably never going to *see* her again! What makes you think she'd even say, 'yes' *anyway?*"

Looking at Marie's door to see if their mother was anywhere near, Rae answered softly and reverently. "I have to *try*, Marie! I... I *love* her!"

Giving Rae a skeptical glance, Marie was about to scoff at Rae's declaration when something made her pause and look into the pained yearning in the younger girl's eyes. Almost alarmed at how serious Rae was, Marie nodded. "Maybe..." Smiling, she got a mischievous look on her face. "*Alright!* I'll try to *help*, if I *can*, Rachel!" Turning serious again she added, "But if she says *no*, you have to know it's gonna *really* hurt!"

"It *already* really hurts." Rae said sadly. "It *can't* get worse!"

When the night finally arrived, Rachel was beside herself with joy to see Harmony walk in her front door. Forced to restrain her giddiness, she just smiled and said, "*Hi!*" shyly.

Harmony, not satisfied with the greeting, crossed the living room and hugged Rae for just a moment longer than appropriate. "I *missed* you, Rae!" she added softly.

While the three ate dinner and talked about happier times roller-skating, playing mini-golf, swimming, and many other memories, Rae couldn't help but notice the sly glances and giggles the two other girls were sharing. Forced to suppress her own giggles and girlishness out of fear of seeming to effeminate in front of her parents, Rae waited patiently for dinner to end so they could be free to run off to the loft and have their time without any parents around to make Rachel hide. Time seeming to drag on forever, finally the moment came.

"*OK, girls!*" Laura said with a smile to the two twelve-year-olds, seemingly ignoring Rae's presence and invitation. "You ready for your night?" Seeing the two girls nod eagerly, she glanced over at Rae doubtfully. "You *sure* you want *Ray*... sorry... *Raymond* there tonight? I'm sure he'd be just *fine* playing in his room so you girls could have your *own* fun without a little *brother* around."

Rae's face fell ashen with the thought that she might get so close to a dream come true, being part of a real girl's sleepover, and miss it due to her mother's interference. After a moment, Harmony came to Rae's rescue.

"Mrs. *Evans*? *Rae's* been one of my best friends for *two years*, and the *only* boy who's ever been a *real* friend! *Please?* Please don't make h... him miss out on our *last* night as best friends?"

Seeing Marie nod in agreement with a look that said, '*If you say no, I will so lose it!*' Laura looked at the three once more before giving in. "*Alright!*"

Fine! Go!" As the three began to fast-walk toward the garage, she grabbed Rae's arm at the last moment. "*Raymond? Best behavior! And your sister's in charge, got it? What she says goes! No arguments! One shouting match between you and you sleep in your room no matter who started it! Got it?*"

Rae nodded with eyes wide in fear before her mother released her arm. Running off after the other girls, once free of her mother's gaze, a smile crept across her face. Reaching the garage, she saw that Marie and Harmony were both already up the ladder and in the loft. Hurrying after them, once safely ensconced in the hideaway, she let out a breath.

"I almost thought Mom was going to ruin *everything!*" Getting a hug from both Marie and Harmony to reassure her, the three then sat and began listening to music, dancing, and generally having fun the way only girls can understand. Rae watched as Marie painted Harmony's nails and then vice-versa with a wistful sigh once they were done. "I sure wish..."

Harmony looked at Rae with a happy grin. "Want me to paint *yours*, Rae? We can take it off before *morning!*"

Her heart beating in her ears just at the thought, Rae was terrified and thrilled at the idea. Unable to even speak, she just nodded. Watching as Harmony opened the pink bottle, she was almost lightheaded with joy as the older girl painstakingly applied the feminine color to Rae's hands. Giggling erupted from all three as Rae joined them in the kind of fun no boy would ever willingly endure without blackmail or physical force.

As the evening pressed on, Rae was waiting for just the right time to ask what she had been dying to for over a year. Once Laura had paid the girls a visit and saw that nothing untoward was going on, and with Rachel's fingers hidden while she was there, the three decided it was time to change into nightclothes. Grumpily pulling out a pair of boy's pajamas, Rae threw them on her sleeping bag with a grumbled, "*Blech!*"

Marie giggled as she got out her nightgown. "Um... *problem*, Rachel?"

Looking at Marie's nightgown and then at her pajamas, she then looked at Marie with a hand on one hip. "*Duh!*"

Giggling once more, Marie reached into her sleeping bag and, looking around for any signs of spying by their parents, did something she hadn't done in almost four years, handing Rae some of her clothes. "Here. You can have one of mine... *Rachel.*"

Awestruck at the gesture, Rae noticed it was one of Marie's pink satiny nightgowns her sister had worn years ago, the one she'd envied a hundred times and missed being able to even look at once Marie outgrew it. Gasping as she looked at her sister, and then to Harmony who stood grinning and nodding eagerly, Rae delicately took the offered bundle. "*Thank you!*" she whispered in awe as her eyes moistened.

"*Well!*" Harmony interrupted the solemn moment. "I've been waiting long *enough* to see the real you! *Change* already!"

Sparking a giggle fit among the three girls, Rae almost dove into her sleeping bag with the offered garments to change. Hearing several more giggles from outside her cocoon, Rae struggled to hurry so she could join the other two. Finally, after donning the offered panties and nightgown, Rae peaked out of the bag to see the other two girls dancing to a slow song in their nightgowns together. "*Ready.*" she said timidly.

The two stopped and turned to her, Rachel slowly emerging to stand next to them. "D... does anyone h-have a brush I c-could b-borrow?" Wanting to brush her hair out that she'd managed to get away with growing out longer than it had ever been in her life, she thought she might manage to do something girly with it for the night. When Marie offered her the one she'd brought, Rae looked around before she realized there were no mirrors in the loft.

Seeing the girl really for the first time, Harmony took Rae's hand as she looked helplessly around the room. "Here. Let *me* do it!" Guiding Rae to sit on her own pink sleeping bag, Harmony began brushing Rachel's hair. "I can't believe how much you *really* look like a *girl*, Rachel! I mean, I've *known* you were really a girl for so long, but you really *do* make a pretty girl!" Leaning her head over Rae's shoulder and resting her chin on it while hugging her from behind she added, "Told you!"

The two giggled as Harmony went back to brushing out Rae's hair. With Marie's help, and with a few barrettes, in a short time Harmony put the brush aside. "*There!*" Turning Rae around, she was stunned with her own work. "*Wow!* If I didn't *know* better, there is *no way* I'd think you were a boy! You are *such* a girl!"

Blushing, Rae shied away. "*Thank* you!" Looking past Harmony to her big sister, she almost cried. "Thank you *too*, Marie! *So* much!"

"*OK!*" Marie interrupted the moment. "Enough *mushy* stuff! Time for *fun!*" Pulling out some Mad-Libs, the three girls sprawled out on their sleeping bags and made each other laugh until their sides ached. As ten o'clock came and the girls knew they needed to keep quiet or risk getting told off for breaking noise laws, Marie put in a tape of nothing but soft rock ballads.

When it was Rae's turn to dance with Harmony, she knew the time had finally come. In the middle of Spandau Ballet's *True*, with her arms holding Harmony's waist and Harmony's arms around her neck, Rae worked up the courage. Softly, with all the feeling the ten-year-old could muster, she spoke. "Harmony? I... I wanted to *ask* you something."

A knowing smile lit up the beautiful girl's face. "What is it, Rachel? You can ask me *anything* you want!"

More nervous than when she'd first told Harmony about her true self, she forced herself to overcome her shyness. "I... I was *hoping*... um... would

you... uh... could I be... your... um... *girlfriend*? I mean, like *girlfriend-girlfriend*... like... um... *dating girlfriend*?"

Expecting the question, she'd fully intended on letting Rae down easy using the excuse of their distance to explain why, but faced with the question coming from the lips of the adorable girl in front of her, and knowing the girl that was asking her so well, she was having a hard time declining as her heart melted at Rachel's sweetness. "Um... *wow!*"

Rae held on more tightly as they continued to dance. "I... I just... I *need* to tell you. I... I don't just *like* you... or even just *like-like* you. I... um..." She leaned in close to Harmony's ear, whispering in a hug as the song was ending. "I... I *love* you. Like, for *real* love you!"

Turning her head in complete surprise like she'd been bitten, Harmony had never been told that by someone who wasn't family. Sure, she'd said it casually to her friends like Marie and they to her, but Harmony knew Rachel was totally serious and meant she was in full-on romantic love with her... and she *liked* the feeling. "C... can I *think* about it, Rachel? I... I just want to be *sure* how I feel. *OK?*"

Nodding vigorously, Rae smiled. "It's *OK!* You can take all the time you *need!* Even if the answer's *no*... it's *still* OK. I... I just *needed* to tell you and take the chance, or I'd have regretted it the rest of my *life!*"

Marie impatiently tapped her foot as the last song had ended and the next had begun. "Rae! It's *my* turn to dance! Quit *hogging* her!"

Moving to her sleeping bag to watch her sister dance with the girl she loved, Rae sighed happily. *There! I did it! No matter what she says now, I'll at least be able to say I took the chance!* Happier than she'd ever been in her life, Rae thought she couldn't ever feel better. When it was her turn to dance again, which Marie made her wait two songs since Rae had taken up

the start of the first one, the two simply danced in silence together, this time with Harmony holding Rae's head to her budding breast.

The song nearing the end, Harmony surprised Rae by whispering in her ear. "I... I'll tell you before we go to bed, *OK?*" Feeling the younger and smaller girl nod slowly, she closed her eyes and simply enjoyed the moment.

Nearly two hours later, as Marie and Harmony were dancing the last dance together while Rae watched, Harmony kept looking down at the girl. Sitting on her belly on top of the same sleeping bag she'd changed clothes in with her feet kicked up and her head propped up on her hands, she was just too adorable. Rae was looking back at her with an expression of pure joy on the younger girl's face and more herself and happy than Harmony had ever known her to be... and Harmony *liked* her this way. *No...* Harmony realized, *I... love her this way!* As the song neared the end, she made direct eye contact with Rachel with an expression of adoration and happiness of her own as she simply nodded.

Rae's breath caught in her chest. *Yes?* Looking quizzically back at the older girl as she sat up, she asked without words if the simple nod was the answer to her question. When Harmony nodded more vigorously as she mouthed the words, *'I love you, too'*, Rachel knew then without a doubt. *She said Yes! She... she wants me, Rachel Michelle Evans, to... to be... her... her girlfriend! And... she loves me! The real me!* Tears of joy rolled down her cheeks as she grabbed a tissue and wiped them away only for more to follow.

When the three bedded down for the night, each in their own sleeping bags, Rachel slept a night more peaceful and wonderful than any she'd ever had in her life. *Life is so beautiful and wonderful! Thank you God! Thank you for my life! Thank you for Harmony! I'm so glad you made me the way I am! The way Harmony likes... the way Harmony loves me. Thank you so much!*

Years later, with almost everyone in her life telling her that it had to have just been 'puppy love', Rae *knew* they were wrong. The strength of the love she felt for Harmony that night had never faded for a moment. It was as pure a love as is possible. Love that had grown from friendship to romance over months and years of getting to know someone, their good and their bad moments, who they were when happy or sad, seeing them both sick and well, and learning to care more for *their* happiness than your own. All between two girls not even yet teenagers. Most of four decades later, Rachel would *still* be hopelessly in love with Harmony, and would likely *remain* so for the rest of her days and beyond.

Book II: Far to Fall

Chapter 8 - This Too Shall Pass

Rachel was beyond angry; she was almost livid beyond the ability to speak. In the sixteen months that had followed what had been the happiest moment of her life, her entire world had fallen apart and descended into a living hell.

Fifth grade in Sparks had been a nightmare. It being the first time she would be going to school alone, Marie having moved on to Junior High, Rae was humiliated when her parents insisted she had to go to daycare before school. Since her mother would now be going to work, and Marie would already be at school, no one would be around to watch Rae. The real insult was that Marie and Harmony had been trusted to not only take care of *themselves* at her age, but *other* people's children as *well*. Meanwhile, Rae wasn't trusted to even take care of *herself*. It was only the first nail in the coffin of her happiness.

Rae didn't actually *mind* the daycare center. It was filled with toys, games, and had cable TV, as well as babies and little kids she would love nothing better than to help take care of, but she wasn't even allowed in the same room as the other kids. Her first day there, being the oldest kid there by over a *year*, the staff seemed intent on segregating her into a library by herself to 'study', where she could hear other kids playing.

Worse, the 'library' was just a small room no bigger than a large closet that was a mess of books well below her reading level. Only the unorganized bookshelves that lined the walls, a low table, and four chairs made for toddlers occupied it with her. It was like being in solitary confinement. When she asked why she needed to be kept apart, she was told, "Boys your age are mean to little kids."

The first day of school after that was horrific. Mr. Griffin, her teacher, was not only a strict man, but also one who also believed that ten-year-old boys

were a problem to be fixed with harsh discipline, while ten-year-old girls only needed gentle nudging in the right direction. On a statistical basis, Mr. Griffin was mostly correct; ten-year-old boys as a whole are unruly, defiant, boisterous, loud, and easily distracted, while girls that age are generally more ordered, obedient, reserved, quiet, and focused. Rae didn't fit the mold, but Mr. Griffin tried to shove her in it anyway.

When word got around that Rae had to go to daycare before school, which took all of two hours to circulate, she was teased *mercilessly*. Rae couldn't even figure out how anyone her age would even *know* she'd been in daycare that morning, since she was the only ten year old there. Not that it mattered *how* they knew, it only matter that they *did*. By the end of school that day, Rae had been chased, tripped, pushed around, had her feet stepped on, her pencils stolen, called every baby name in the book, and denied use of the playground by the other kids who kept telling her, "The Kindergarten playground is on the other side of the building!"

The next morning, she didn't go to the center; she went straight to school and played in the playground for a few hours by herself and continued to do so for the rest of the week. At the start of the next week, when her parents gave her a check to give to the daycare, she just threw it in the gutter and walked to school as before. She couldn't keep up the charade for long.

Her parents found out what Rae had been doing when the daycare called and asked why Rae was no longer attending... and the school called to complain that Rae had been seen playing in the playground hours before the grounds were open to students. Trying to explain her plight fell on deaf ears as her parents insisted that her troubles were proof that she *needed* to be in daycare.

As the months rolled by, Rae tried her best to be good, but the isolation of going to school alone with no friends wore down on her. The only bright points in her life were the calls from Harmony that she was allowed twice a week. Rae found it quite unfair that Marie had a phone of her own by her

age, while she was forced to use the one in the kitchen with her mother there to listen.

Thus, her conversations with Harmony were almost completely one-sided; Rachel listened while Harmony talked. Their lack of ability to be free and open with one another, and Rae's obvious unhappiness that she was unable to freely talk to Harmony about, took its toll on their budding relationship. It was no surprise one Wednesday afternoon when the phone rang and Rae answered it immediately.

"Evans' Residence! *Rae* speaking!" she almost giggled into the phone knowing full well who was calling because it was four o'clock.

"*Hi.*" Harmony replied. "Is it safe to *talk?*"

Seeing her mother eaves-dropping on only her half of the conversation, and knowing that Marie was in her room and her father at work, meant no one could be listening in on an extension. "*Hi, Harmony! Yes?*" she replied happily.

"Um... *Rae?* Sorry, but I can't talk long, *K?*" Harmony mumbled.

"I don't *mind!*" Rachel replied, her smile audible even over the phone. "I'm just glad to *hear* from you!"

Taking a breath, Harmony felt an ache in her heart. "*Dang* it, *Rae!* Why do you have to be so... so... *sweet!*"

Hearing the anguish in her voice, Rachel tried to console her as best she could with her mother almost craning her neck to listen in. "Is something wrong?"

"No... *yes!*" the flustered girl stumbled. The call was not going the way she'd planned. "*Rae... I... I want you to sit down and *listen* for a minute, *OK?*"*

Sitting at the dining room table, Rachel was worried about Harmony. *She sounds awfully upset! I need to just be the best girlfriend I can be and just listen, support her however she needs me to, and just be happy I'm hers and that she loves me... whatever it takes to make her happy!* Clearing her throat was Rachel's coded way of saying *'I love you'*. "Ahem... I'm listening."

Close to tears as she heard Rachel secretly profess her love, Harmony almost changed her mind. "Rae... Rachel... I... Oh *God*, how do I *say* this? The *last* thing I *ever* wanted was you getting *hurt*! When I said you could be my girlfriend, *believe* me, I *meant* it, OK? I didn't *care* that we would hardly see each other anymore. That just being able to talk on the phone until I was old enough to drive and come *see* you would be *enough*! Maybe even get *together* a few times a year for *your* birthday or *mine* to go *skating*, or *golf*, or *whatever*! You made me *so* happy you were *mine*! But... but I just can't *stand* not being able to really talk to *you*! You have to just *sit* there and I *know* you want to say *so much* and you *can't* and I don't even know *what's* going on with *you*! I haven't heard *my* Rachel since that *night*!"

Rachel listened as Harmony bared her soul, wondering what she could do to ease her pain, but a glance over her shoulder at her mother reminded her that she could do nothing but sit and listen.

"*God*! I *know*! I know *right now* that you want to *say* something and you *can't*! It's not *fair*! I can't even hear you tell me you *love* me again and I *need* to hear it! I want to hold my *Rachel* in my arms and hear her tell me she *loves* me!" Now actually crying, Harmony knew it was time to say what she needed to. "I... I can't *do* it anymore, Rae! I... I'm *so* sorry! I miss you *so* much it *hurts* and I don't want to *hurt* anymore, *OK*?"

"I... I don't want that, *either*." Rachel said softly. "Is there anything I can do to *help*?"

Hearing the girl buried beneath the simple few words, so willing to do anything to make her happy, was almost enough to alleviate the pain, but

only just enough to make it worse. "I... I can't be your *girlfriend* anymore, Rae. I'm *so* sorry! I need to like... be *happy* again and this is the *only* way I can see!" Pausing while she prepared to deliver the news, Harmony felt Rachel's heart break. "There's... um... there's a *boy* at my school... and he *likes* me... and he makes me *laugh*. Do you *understand*?"

Stunned as her heart shattered at the revelation, Rachel almost dropped the phone. *No! Not again! I can't go back to being all alone again! Please God! Please don't do this to me!*

"Rae?" Harmony checked. "Are... are you still *there*?"

"Yes." Rae answered emptily. "I'm here."

"So do you *understand*?" Harmony cried, wiping tears from her round face.

"Yeah, I understand." she replied. "I want you to be happy. *Ahem.*"

Harmony sobbed as she heard Rachel still professing her love even after all she'd said. "You really *do, don't* you Rae?" she finally answered after pulling herself together. "*God!* That makes this even *worse!* I... wish it was different! I wish it didn't have to *hurt!* Maybe it would've been *better* if I'd told you *no* when you asked me like I'd *planned* to, but you were just so... so *beautiful* and *wonderful*... and totally *mine*... I just *couldn't* say no! Do you *forgive* me Rae? *Please* say you do and that it's *OK?*"

Swallowing hard to keep the tears at bay just a short while longer, Rachel nodded before realizing Harmony couldn't see her. "*Yes... yes I do.* And it's *OK.* *Ahem.* I... I hope that thing you were talking about is *nice.*"

"He *is!*" Harmony replied with a laugh, drying her eyes as Rachel still managed to make her smile and love her, even as she broke the younger girl's heart. "You... you are like... *such* a wonderful girl, Rae! I... I know *whatever* girl gets you is gonna be *so* lucky! *Way* better than *me!*"

"Fat chance of *that!*" Rachel said glumly. Not wanting Harmony to hurt anymore though, she decided it would be best to just go along with her and accept what she was saying. "But... if you *say* so, then it *must* be true."

Not able to take much more, Harmony stifled another sob. "*Rae? I'm so gonna miss you, but... I just can't call you anymore, OK? It... it hurts too much! Bye... bye Rachel. I still love you.*"

"*Bye, Harmony. Ahem.*" Rachel could just hear another sob as the line disconnected. Hanging up the phone, she glanced at her mother who looked back at her curiously.

"What was *that* all about?" Laura quizzed. "Is everything *alright*, baby?"

Shoving her feelings down inside her once more, Rae nodded and lied. "It's *fine*. Harmony's just having a hard time with Middle School and can't talk on the phone much anymore. *Besides*, half the things she talks about I can't relate to *anyway*. I guess we're just too different to be good *friends* anymore." Sadness welling up inside her and overwhelming her ability to push it away, Rae knew she had to get away from her mother. "I... I gotta go finish my homework." She barely managed to turn around before the tears began to fall as she walked off to her room.

While Laura stood in the kitchen watching Rae leave, she *knew* something was wrong, but Rae had become so distant from her and so closed off that she didn't know how to reach out to her anymore.

Throwing herself on her bed as she began to sob uncontrollably, Rae fell into a despair that was even worse than the day she ran away from school. *I just want to die! Please God! Just let me die! It hurts so bad!*

Months passed as Rae's attitude worsened. Hardly spending any time with her family, on top of having no friends anymore, not even Harmony, she drifted from day to day like a piece of wood floating on the tide. Nothing

made her happy for more than a few minutes, nor phased her when they turned out bad; not even when her parents told her they were getting a divorce. All she did was ask if it was her fault and then just floated with the change, not even really believing her parents and blaming herself for making them argue all the time.

For her part, Marie wasn't even really a part of Rae's life anymore. Focused on school and her friends, she started using 'Raymond' again and refused to accept that she was really a girl inside, insisting that Rae was just being stubborn and refusing to grow up and 'face facts'. When their parents announced the divorce and Rae confided in Marie that she felt like it was *her* fault, Marie, so consumed with anger over the divorce, hatefully *agreed*.

By spring the Evans were moving for the sixth time in ten years; this time to separate places in south Reno. The two apartments were only about half a mile apart with Marie's new Middle School and Rae's new Elementary School almost exactly halfway between them, but neither felt much like home anymore to the hollowed out shell called Rae. With no one to look out for her, and no will to even protect herself, Rae was beaten up going to school almost every day by boys just wanting to look tough at her expense. The fact that beating up a weakling girl who never fought back didn't prove anything was irrelevant.

When her mother started dating and became involved with a man named Todd Eaton with two children of his own, Rae hardly noticed. When she got married to him and the two kids became her step-brother George and step-sister Trish, she was only vaguely aware of it, not even sure if she'd been at the wedding or not. In the aftermath though, Rae was shocked back to reality as she at last plunged to the lowest depths of her own personal living hell.

Rachel... in her mind, heart, and soul... was a sweet and innocent not-yet eleven-year-old Christian girl who loved Disney princesses, The Carpenters, still believed in Santa, and who hadn't even been kissed yet. Nobody *cared*

when a girl like this was forced to share a room with an almost sixteen year old stoner boy, a situation no *reasonable* person would ever take as acceptable in mid-eighties America.

Incense, cigarette and marijuana smoke, and the stench of teenage boy and stolen beer permeated everything she owned as anti-Christian rock with messages of death and suicide beat her ears day and night. Satanic-looking incense holders and nudie magazines sat on the desk she used to write letters to Santa. Worst of all, Rae was forced to lie in bed every night and listen to him masturbate in the bunk above hers, while she cried at her lost innocence and tried to ignore the shaking of her bed and blot out the noise with her hands. It was almost as if George was doing it to *her*. She knew then what it must be like to be raped as nightmares of rape and death tortured her sleep.

Weekends with her father were almost as bad. While Marie had a room of her own, Rae was forced to sleep on the hide-a-bed in the living room, ensuring she never got a *moment* of privacy. Even though Marie had given her the nightgown she'd borrowed on the most wonderful night of her life, she never had the chance to wear it, nor even dared *look* at it for fear it would be seen and taken from her. Eventually, Rae concluded that she must not be as important to her father as Marie, the girl who could do no wrong, and so didn't *deserve* anything... not even privacy or her daddy's love.

Slowly, Rae's innocence was beaten out of her, not only by the continual tortures of her stepbrother George and emotional isolation of her father's obvious preference for her sister, but also by the cruel hand of her stepfather Todd. Spankings, slaps in the mouth or on the back of the head, or even a belt across a bare butt were *common* for even the *smallest* infraction in his household... but only for *Rae*.

George, Trish, and Marie were spared his physical temper. George because he was big enough to fight back, while Trish and Marie were considered 'off-limits' because they were girls and any such assault on them would be seen as abusive or even sexual assault in the case of belting a bare butt. Rae

had nothing and no one to protect her from his ire save being perfect, which was impossible as he always saw the worst in everything... most especially the 'sissy boy' Rae.

By Christmas her mother and family were moving once more, this time back to live with her grandparents. While Trish and Marie would be sharing the same room Rae had shared with her growing up, the same one in which her mother caught her wearing Marie's Blue Birds uniform seven years earlier, Rae would be shuffled off to the basement with George. The *worst* part was that there was an available room, the one next to her old room that wasn't even being used for anything other than storage. Rae felt she had now been classed as 'less important than *junk*' by her family.

The basement was a crude area beneath the living room with cinderblock walls, a bare concrete floor, no ceiling other than the underside of the floor above, and dirt still visible behind the unfinished stairs. Black Widows would often nest in Rae's shoes, forcing her to kill them herself just to get dressed in the morning, and dirt from under the stairs would have to be swept off her bed before going to sleep at night.

It was the nights that terrified Rae the most. George's bed now sat across a small walkway from hers instead of the old bunks that the two had been sharing, so now she was forced to either watch George or stare at the dirt under the stairs, which was the preferred choice. Sometimes she would hear him talking... mumbling foul words as he smoked and listened to his music on his headphones... or did other more unspeakable things. Sleep only brought nightmares.

Rae was lying in her bed when the sound of flames filled the room. Terrified, she tried to hide under her blankets, but was frozen in place. As she watched, feet of living flame slowly came down the stairs, burning the wood and filling her lungs with smoke. Even as she coughed, the noise was overwhelmed by the sound of fire and wicked laughter as the feet descended into the room to reveal a man of living flame.

Rae didn't need to ask who he was. She *knew*.

"I've come for *you* Raymond!" Satan bellowed. "You're *mine*!"

As Rae prayed for God's deliverance, Satan's laughter boomed off the walls as cinderblocks cracked with the heat she could feel on her face.

"No one will *save* you!" he thundered. "He *hates* you and everything you *are*! A *failure* of a boy! A miserable little *sissy* who thinks he's a *girl*! You *failed* Him with your *weakness*! Your soul is *mine*!" An arm wreathed in flame pointed to George's bed, now burning with his stepbrother's body laughing and writhing in it as he died. "*He* delivered you to me, and now you're *both* mine!"

While Rae screamed for help, tears vaporizing off her cheeks from the heat, her bed ignited in flames and consumed her.

Startled awake, Rae sat up as she cried out into the darkness of the basement. "*No*!"

George sat forward and took his headphones off. "*Ray*? What's *wrong*, little dude? Want a *beer* or a *hit* or something?"

Trying to catch her breath, she panted as the fear continued to press in as she lay back down in her sweat-soaked sheets. "N-no thanks." she stammered. "J-just a n-nightmare. S-sorry."

George shrugged and chuckled as he put his headphones back on. "What a *dork*!"

When Rae and Marie went to visit their father Gerald that weekend, Rae was never so glad to be away from George. After her nightmare, he pestered her repeatedly to take a hit off his marijuana pipe '*to make you sleep better*'. She was *dreading* going back to that house on Monday, even

though it would be Christmas Eve. That night when she lay down on the couch-bed in her father's living room, Rae started to pray.

God? Please don't make me go back there! she begged. *Todd is mean, but George is evil and he's trying to make me just like him! Just let me die in my sleep! I'm not even asking to go to heaven... just make me not even exist anymore! Please!* Crying herself to sleep, she hoped to never wake again. Unfortunately the next morning she was awoken by her sister yelling. As bad as things had gotten, they could always get worse.

"Oh my *God! No!*" Marie screamed into the phone. As Rae sat up and turned to see what was wrong, she saw Marie standing there in shock. Wondering what was wrong and wanting to comfort her big sister, she saw her father Gerald take the phone as Marie hugged him and cried.

"Who *is* this?" he growled. Silence filled the house other than Marie's crying as Rae's father went ashen, while someone talked from the other end of the phone. Turning serious, Gerald nodded absently. "Don't worry, I'll take care of them. You do what *you* need to do, alright? Do you *need* anything from me? How about Mom and Dad?" Nodding a few times, he finally spoke again. "*OK. Let me know. Bye.*" Hanging up, he embraced Marie. "Just calm down, sweetie. It'll be *alright.*"

"W-what's going *on?*" Rachel stuttered in fear. "Who w-was that?"

Looking over at Rae, Gerald walked Marie over to sit on the side of the hide-a-bed. "That was your mother. There's been an accident out at the house." Pausing to collect himself, Gerald held on to Marie. "There was an explosion... in the basement. George and Trish were badly burned, I guess over eighty percent of their bodies. They were flown to Washoe Med, but right now it doesn't look good, I'm afraid. Your mom and Todd are there now."

All the color drained from Rae's face and she got dizzy. "Th-the b-basement? Y-you m-mean... m-my r-room?" *If it happened tomorrow... that would have been me in there, too!* she realized.

Marie, releasing her father from her death-grip, turned on Rae like a viper. "Your *room*? Is *that* all you can think about? Your stupid *stuff*? George and Trish were nearly *killed*! They *still* might die, and all you care about is your stupid fucking *things*?"

Unable to even focus, the room began to spin as the thought of having been in the explosion made her feel sick as her nightmare came vividly back to her mind. Getting up and stumbling on her own to the bathroom while her father and sister just watched, she barely made it before vomiting into the toilet and passing out.

Rae awoke back on the hide-a-bed. Thinking for a moment that it had been another nightmare, she started to sit up before noticing the foul taste of vomit still in her mouth. *It wasn't a dream.* Looking around the room, it looked like no one was around. Eventually, she heard voices coming from her sister's bedroom. Pulling herself out of bed, she dragged her feet and stumbled her way to her sister's bedroom door, boxes of things still piled all over the room. Seeing her father comforting her sister while Rae had been laying unconscious did nothing but reinforce her opinion that Marie was 'daddy's little girl' and Rae was just the shadow cast by her star.

After standing there for several minutes, waiting to see if she would even be acknowledged, Rae shuffled off once more to the bathroom to brush her teeth. She knew her father had seen her standing there, he'd looked right at her, but continued to just hold Marie as she sobbed into his shoulder. After almost an hour, while Rae got dressed and put away the hide-a-bed, her father came out of Marie's room, closing the door behind him.

"Feeling *better*, Son?" he asked.

"No!" Rae snapped. "Like *you* care!"

"Hey!" Gerald barked. "None of *that*! Your *sister's* already broken up enough as it *is*... I don't need *you* making it *worse*!"

"I'm sorry!" Rae countered sarcastically as she began to cry, not caring that she did so right in front of her father. "Poor *Marie*! I'm *sure* she's just *devastated* that she's not going to get as many *presents* for *Christmas* this year! Do you think she'll *live*? Meanwhile, the room *I've* been *sleeping* in... freaking *blew up*! I guess me being *dead* would be better than Marie being *upset*! Right, *Daddy*? Would you rather I not have *been* here this weekend? *That way* I'd have been in the basement *too*, and now I'd be *gone* and I wouldn't be here *now* to upset poor *Marie*!"

Rae's tirade shocked her father and brought Marie out of her room. Both stared at her in stunned silence as the shock began to wear off Rae and she dropped to her knees and sobbed.

"Ray?" Marie finally said softly. "Ray, I'm *so* sorry! I didn't even *think*..."

"No!" she cried openly. "You *didn't* think! You... you..." unable to say it, the words died on her crying lips. *You just wish I was dead! You get everything and I get nothing! You're the beautiful daughter that Mom and Dad love and I'm the ugly daughter they hate! I hate you!*

"Son..." Gerald said calmly. "I think we need to have a *talk*."

Standing up, tears still streaming down her face, Rachel was beyond angry; she was almost livid beyond the ability to speak. "No! Talk to your *daughter*, Daddy!" she almost screamed as she tried to tell him that she wasn't his son.

"I'm sure Marie's sorry for what she said earlier, Son." he misunderstood. "Aren't you, Marie?"

Nodding, Marie was close to tears again. "I *am* sorry! *Please* forgive me Rae? I wasn't *thinking*! I didn't even *think* that you might have... that it could have been *you* down... down in that basement!"

Overcome with emotion, Rae ran to her sister and the two embraced, crying openly on each other's shoulders while Gerald hugged them both. While she was frustrated that her attempt to tell her father who she really was had failed, at least for that moment, she felt just as safe, protected, and loved by him as Marie ever had. For this brief moment, at least in her mind, she actually *felt* like daddy's little girl.

Chapter 9 - Father Knows Best

While her two stepsiblings survived, it would take *months* of healing in one of the best burn wards in the country for them to be able to even *function*. Living with her father while Laura flew to Boston with their stepfather and his two injured children was difficult for Rae. She *adored* Gerald as all daughters do with their fathers, but he only saw their relationship as 'father-son' and never doted on her the way he did Marie. The most painful part was when he was gone for most of the day at work to be left alone with Marie. Their brief truce that Sunday before Christmas only lasted a few days before Marie was back to acting like the beautiful princess to Rae's ugly stepsister. She'd just gone back to ignoring Rae.

When Christmas break ended and she went back to school, all the kids knew what had happened and for the first time in years she wasn't picked on for weeks. The sympathy wouldn't *last* though, and soon she was back to being the favorite punching bag for every boy on the schoolyard with something to prove. Rae figured that the bullies determined that two weeks mourning was sufficient out of professional courtesy toward Todd.

She also started having trouble getting to school on time because both Marie and her father would be gone before she needed to get up for school, so there was no one at home to rouse her from her typical deep sleep; something that was not her fault. As a result, she got in trouble for being tardy to class more than once, making her again classified as a 'trouble student' bordering on becoming a 'juvenile delinquent'.

Depression took hold as Rae would sit alone for hours, days, weeks, and finally months with no one to talk to. She couldn't make friends with the boys because they hated her for being too much like a girl, and she couldn't make friends with the girls because all they saw was a boy. With her sister ignoring her and spending all her time either at school or hanging with her friends, that left just her father who she could only talk to about man

things. Her feelings were a taboo subject to her father, and Rae felt he wouldn't understand anyway because he'd never been a girl.

One morning, while walking aimlessly around the playground during lunch recess, she sat against the far fence hugging her knees just waiting for the bell to ring and hoping nobody noticed her. She was noticed anyway.

"You *too*, huh?" a boy said as he walked up and sat beside her.

Flinching in fear, she waited for him to hit her, but he didn't. "Me too, *what?*" she finally replied.

"Get beat *up* all the time?" he answered. "My name's *Dan*. What's *yours?*"

"R... Rae." she mumbled. Finally looking over at him, she saw he was small, about the size she'd been when she was nine, and figured he must be in fourth grade. His black hair was an unkempt mess and his thin face was dotted with freckles.

"Want to go sit on the swings?" he asked hopefully.

"*N-no.*" she said, looking at them longingly. "They're a *trap*. *No one* is playing on 'em, but if you *try*, the boys will come over and beat you up."

"Good to *know.*" he nodded. "I just *moved* here. How long *you* been in?"

"Since last April." Rae said, giggling a little at his joke that school was like prison. "I moved here when my parents got divorced."

"Who'd *you* get stuck with?" Dan asked kicking at the rocks under his feet.

"Split custody." she shrugged. "Weekdays with Mom, weekends with Dad... but right now I'm just living with my dad. Mom's back east 'cuz my stepbrother and stepsister were in an accident and got burned."

"You're *that* kid?" Dan said surprised. "I *heard* about those two! Didn't they get burned up playing with matches or something?"

Rae shook her head and giggled a little at how bad the rumor mill was at keeping a story straight. "*No!* They got burned up 'cuz they were smoking *weed* in my grandparents' basement and were hiding their drugs in a *propane* pipe."

"*Wild!*" Dan said with awe. "Did they like get their faces all messed up like Freddy *Krueger*?"

"It's not *funny!*" Rae admonished. "They almost *died!*"

Silence passed for several moments before Dan spoke again. "*Sorry.* Just nothing else to *talk* about."

"Who's your teacher?" Rae asked out of curiosity. "Mrs. Blake or Mr. Farks?"

"Mrs. Dunnam!" Dan said sharply. "Those are *fourth* grade teachers! I'm in *sixth!*"

"*Oh.*" she said shyly. "Sorry. *I* just thought..."

"*Yeah...* you and everyone *else!*" Dan barked. "That's why *I* get beat up... 'cuz I'm so *small.* How about *you?*"

"I won't fight *back.*" Rae admitted. "I *hate* fighting!"

"I *don't!*" he chirped happily. "I *love* a good tumble, but I'm so small I'm no *good* at it, so I *get* it." Turning to her he snickered. "Why don't you like *fighting?* You some kinda pansy *girl* or something?"

"Or *something.*" Rae shot back. "I just don't *like* it, *that's* all! It's *stupid!*"

"You *talk* like a girl!" he laughed. "Oh, *I* don't care... misery loves *company* and all."

"That's *not* what that expression *means*, Dan!" she corrected him. "It means..."

"It means I don't *care*, Ray!" Dan spat. "You want me to start calling you *Rachel*? Ha! Ha!"

"Call me what you *want*... what do *I* care?" she grumbled.

When the bell rang, the two got up and started toward the school building. "See you at next recess?" Dan asked.

"*Sure*." Rachel shrugged. "I've nothing *better* to do."

So it went for the rest of the week. The two would sit talking about nothing and everything as they spent time alone in each other's company. The following Monday he was absent, so Rae just went back to wandering. When he showed up looking fine the next day, she had to ask.

"Where *were* you yesterday?" Rae asked curiously. "You *obviously* weren't *sick*."

"I *skipped*." Dan said as though he were telling her the time. "We had that math test and I didn't feel like sitting through it."

Rae looked at Dan as though he'd suggested murdering the Principal. "You... you *skipped*?"

"*Sure*!" he replied like it was no big deal. "Haven't *you* ever skipped when you knew there was gonna be something you hated that day?"

"*No*!" Rae said defensively. "I'd get *caught*!"

"How?" he asked her. Ticking off his fingers, he went through his thoughts. "One, you're living with your dad and he's *gone* all day, *right*? Two, the only way the school can *contact* your dad is to *call* him, send a *note* home, or mail a *letter*. If you're not there to give a *note* to, they'll just call your house when you're the only one *there*. Three, so long as you don't do it *too* often, they won't *bother* with a letter... they'll just send a note home the next day and accept whatever story you give them when you throw out the note because they have no *choice*! See? *Easy*!"

Rae thought over the situation a bit before realizing that the major reason kids even *went* to school and *stayed* was their willing submission to authority. Take that away, and it would be almost *impossible* to keep kids in class. However, since the kids rarely *realized* it, the system *worked*.

"I'm taking this *Friday* off too." Dan said after a moment. "Wanna join me Ray? No *History* exam!"

Shaking her head, Rae furrowed her brow. "*N-no*! I just *couldn't*!"

"Whatever... *Rachel*! Ha! That'll *never* get old!"

Smiling slightly at being called Rachel, even though it was meant as an insult, Rae sat silently with Dan all the rest of recess. That Friday Rae woke up with a start and looked at the clock. *Oh no!* she thought as she put a hand over her eyes. *Nine forty! Even if I left now I'd be an hour late!* Remembering what she'd talked with Dan about, she sat up and giggled. "I just won't *go*!"

Getting up, she was almost happy with the turn of events as she dressed. When the phone rang and was picked up by the answering machine, she listened while the secretary left a message, promptly deleting it as soon as they hung up. Grabbing her key, she left and locked the door behind her, walking up the street to the city bus stop. Riding the bus to the mall, she got off and headed for the arcade. Since school was in session, the place

was deserted, but the manager shooed her away, even after she told him she was out of school due to a dental appointment.

Dejected, she returned back to her house and sat on the sofa. Thinking a moment, she remembered that Dan had given her his phone number and that he was skipping school that day, too. Quickly, she dug out the number and called him. Once she got his parents' answering machine she started talking.

"*Hey! Dan! I know you're there. It's me, Rae! Pick up!*"

Dan picked up the phone "Howdy, *skipper!* Decided to *join* me?"

"*Sorta.*" she answered. "I woke *up* late and decided not to bother rushing off to get *yelled* at."

"Good *plan!*" he congratulated her. "Can I come *over?*"

"*Sure!*" Giving him the address, Rae began tidying up, humming a tuneless song to herself as she prepared the apartment for her guest. When he knocked half an hour later, she opened it happily. "Come on *in!*"

Dan looked around her father's apartment. "*Nice.* Where's *your* room?"

Looking down embarrassed, she shook her head. "I... I don't *have* a room. I sleep on the sofa. Only my dad and sister get a room each."

"*Nice!* Second-class *sibling!*" Dan started poking around and ended up in her sister's room. "How *old* is she?" he asked.

"*Thirteen.*" Rae answered as she absently fingered Marie's dresser. "And thinks she's God's *gift* to the world!"

"Obviously *Daddy* agrees." he snarked. "Jeeze! Think she's got enough *junk*? Where do you keep *your* stuff?"

"Most of *my* stuff was in the basement when the house exploded." Rae explained. "All I have *now* is the few things I kept here."

"Got any *video* games? Like an *Atari*?" he asked.

"*No.*" she shook her head. "We *had* a 5200, but it was in the *fire*. I think my dad still has his old *Pong* game."

"So... no *toys*... no good *games*... no *nothing*! Just a room full of *girl's* stuff! Wanna come to *my* house? I got *lots* of cool stuff!"

Suddenly inspired, Rae shook her head. "*No*... you go *ahead*. I think I'm just gonna hang out *alone* for a bit. See you on *Monday*?"

Shrugging, Dan shook his head. "*Man*, I thought *I* was hard up for stuff! See you *Monday*!"

After he left, Rae actually giggled with joy at what she had in mind. Rushing off to the bathroom, she showered using Marie's shampoo and toweled off quickly. Then, with the towel wrapped around her chest, went into Marie's room and started getting dressed. Pulling out her favorite outfit, a pink and white floral skirt with an off-the-shoulder drop-top, she laughed happily as she let Rachel out of her cage for the first time in over a year and a half.

Dressing carefully, she relished getting to be a girl again. While her hair was longer than most boys, it was still relatively short and cut in a boy's style and, after a few attempts, she gave up trying to replicate what Harmony and Marie had done with it. *I just won't look in any mirrors!* she determined. Turning on her father's stereo, she selected a nice romantic album of instrumental classics from the 50s and 60s and put it on. Dancing slowly around the room alone, she enjoyed a few songs with her imaginary

girlfriend before sitting on the couch, curling her feet under her, and picking up one of her father's books to read.

She sat reading and listening to music for over an hour before she was startled out of her happy reverie by the sound of a key in the lock. Panic stricken, she looked at the clock, which said it was not yet noon, so her sister wasn't due home for almost three more hours. Moving quickly, she ran for her sister's bedroom and stood behind the door. She knew her chances of Marie not finding her were slim to none, but there was nothing else she could do. Sure, Marie might shout at her, but Rae didn't care. She'd gotten some time to be herself and it had been enough.

"Ray?" her father's voice boomed through the apartment.

Her eyes flew wide open in terror. *Daddy? Home before five? Shit! He knows I'm not in school! What am I gonna do? If I try to change he'll hear me, and if I don't he'll see me!* Half hoping he would find her so she could finally confront her family about who she really was, she just closed her eyes and waited. *If he finds me, so be it... it'll finally be out in the open and I can talk about it. If he doesn't, then it means I'm supposed to keep it hidden. Either way, I can't keep pretending to be Raymond all the time! I have to be me!*

Gerald knew Rae had to be here. As he searched the living room he saw the place had been cleaned up and one of his old albums was playing on the turntable. Seeing that the bathroom door was open, he knew Rae had to be either in his room or his daughter's. Seeing his room empty and undisturbed, he headed into the last room in the house... Marie's.

Rae's heart leapt to her throat as the door began to open to her left, forcing her to look at it. The opening of the door would actually conceal her behind it if her father opened it all the way until it bumped into Marie's dresser, creating a small hidden triangle. The door only opened halfway though, and she closed her eyes tightly. Pushing herself flat against the wall behind

her; her right cheek mashed into the wall hoping that if he hit her the wall would absorb most of the impact. She only heard an exasperated sigh before her father spoke. "Get *changed*." was all he said before Rae heard the door close and the sound of her father's footsteps retreating into the living room.

Picking up her clothes from where she'd put them before her shower, Rachel took off her sister's outfit and began getting dressed again. Terrors of what awaited her in the form of her father's wrath filled her brain as she began to cry. *Now I have to tell him! There's no backing out!*

Creeping out of Marie's room, Rachel saw her father sitting in his recliner smoking his pipe. "Um... *hi*." was all she could manage before the lump in her throat closed off her ability to speak.

"Sit down... *Son*." Gerald ordered her calmly. As soon as Rae was seated on the couch, he tapped his pipe on the glass ashtray to empty it. "Why aren't you in *school* and where have you *been*?"

Rachel had always found the scent of her father's pipe soothing and sometimes would just open his tin to smell the aroma as it always made her feel safe and protected. Right now, it served to help her relax enough to talk. "I... I woke up late, school was already started, so I just didn't *go*."

"*Bullshit!*" he shouted. "I *know* you weren't *here* this morning, Ray! When the school called me at work, I came right here and *looked!* You weren't *here!* Now stop *lying* and tell me where you *were!*"

Realizing he must have arrived while she was at the mall, Rachel gulped. *Great! Now, just because I didn't tell him about going to the mall yet, he'll think whatever I say is a lie!* Gathering her thoughts, she tried to keep herself calm as tears began to well up in her eyes. "I... I left for a little while... I took the city bus down to the mall and tried to go into the arcade,

but the guy there wouldn't let me stay. After that I took the bus right back here and haven't left since! I *swear!*"

"You expect me to believe that a city *bus* driver let you on the bus during *school* hours?" he growled. Not hearing a response, he pressed further. "Were you dressed like *that...* what you're wearing *now...* or like when I *found* you?"

"Like *this.*" Rae answered through tears.

"Was someone *here?*" he asked.

Looking at him as though he were psychic, Rae got a stunned look on her face. *How could he possibly know about Dan? Did the school tell him Dan was absent too and that we'd been seen on the playground together?* Hesitating, she simply nodded.

"*Who?* Was it an *adult?* A *teenager?* Did they *make* you dress up like that?"

"*No!*" Rae shouted. "It... it was *Dan!*"

"Who the *hell* is Dan? How *old* is he? How do you *know* him?"

"He goes to *school* with me! He's in sixth grade... just like *me!*"

His face turning dark, he looked at Rae sternly. "Did he *touch* you?"

Shocked, Rae stood up and turned away from her father feeling dirty at him even asking the question. "*God* no! What the heck do you think was going *on* here, Dad? Do you even *know* me?"

"Apparently *not!*" he shouted. "Are you doing *drugs?*"

Rae laughed at the suggestion. Since meeting George and seeing firsthand what the stoner life was like, and what it had done to both George and Trish, Rae would rather claw out her own *eyes* than do what *they* did. "No! No *drugs!*"

"So then..." He stopped and calmed himself, forcing his voice to a lower tone. "Please sit down and *look* at me, Son."

Resenting her father's sole term of endearment for her, Rae considered snubbing his reasonable request on principle *alone*, but thought better of it and returned to her seat on the couch facing him.

Calmly, seeing that Rae was being cooperative, Gerald tried again. "So then... *why* were you *dressed* like that, Son?"

Faced with the question, it suddenly occurred to her how stupid the question really was. *Gee, Daddy... why do you think? Maybe because I'm a girl and I always have been?* Calming herself, she closed her eyes and took a cleansing breath. *Well... here goes nothing.* As she opened her eyes, she looked Gerald straight in the eye. "Because I'm a *girl*." The stricken look on her father's face caught Rae by surprise. *How could he not know? Unless...* Slowly it dawned on her that her mother Laura could very well have never told him about her wanting to be a girl. Her mother did tend to dismiss it quickly and then pretend it never happened whenever she caught her dressing as Rachel.

"Who put *that* idea in your head?" Gerald spat harshly.

"*Nobody!*" Rae exclaimed. Standing up again, she paced the living room. "Jeeze, Dad! Why are you always thinking someone is *doing* something *bad* to me! You don't seem to *care* when I get *beat up* by the kids on the way to *school*, but I tell you I'm a *girl* and suddenly the *boogie* man is *corrupting* me!"

Gerald stood up and faced Rae sternly. "You have *no idea* how *evil* some people can be in the world, Son! Now *sit down!*" Watching Rae return to the couch cowed, he let out a sigh. "Now you got it in your head from *somebody* that you should be a girl! Who *was* it?"

"*Me!*" Rae shouted back. "I got it from *my* head!"

"*Bullshit!* Boys don't suddenly wanna be *girls* at age *eleven!*" he yelled. "Who!?"

Crying again, Rae was beginning to think she was going to be forced to lie again because her father wouldn't believe the truth. *No! I can't lie about this! If I tell him a name, someone could go to jail for it! I have to stand firm!* Looking up through tear-filled eyes, she tried to voice her thoughts, but he had scared her into inability to speak. All she could do was croak.

"Do I have to *spank* the name out of you?" Gerald barked.

"*No!*" Rae screamed. Quivering in fear at the idea of her father hitting her the way that Todd or the bullies at school hit her, she began openly bawling.

Seeing her reduced to a quivering mass of traumatized terror, he wondered who it was that had done this terrible thing and when they had gotten to his child. Backing off to give Rae time to calm down, he returned to his chair and worked to re-light his pipe.

As the soothing smell of her father's pipe filled the room once more, Rae slowly came back from the place she retreated to when the latest bully was beating on her or when Todd was taking his turn on her body, her pretend life as a normal girl. Slowing her tears, she grabbed a tissue and dabbed at her eyes until finally she stopped crying.

"So... are you ready to *talk* again?" Gerald asked through gritted teeth that were holding his pipe.

Nodding, Rae took another cleansing breath and blew it out slowly. Looking at him as she repressed another sobbing fit, Rae tried once more. "*No one* put the idea of being a girl in my *head*, Dad... I *swear* to you! I... I've *always* been a girl! Didn't *Mom* tell you about all the times she caught me dressing up in Marie's *clothes*? I've been doing it ever since I was *three*!"

Gerald looked at Rae and saw no signs of deception. She seemed to be telling the truth, or at least what Rae *believed* to be the truth. Still believing that someone had corrupted his 'son', a teacher... a faculty member... a Cub Scout leader... a Coach... a family member... There was a list of adults too long to think about who he thought he trusted that could have had enough time alone with her to twist her young mind into believing that she'd always wanted this. "Son..."

This time, Rae sighed and almost growled at her father. "Do you *have* to call me that?"

"I'll call you whatever I *want* call you!" Gerald barked. Laura had indeed told him about Rae dressing up in her sister's clothes, but that had been back when she was four years old. He knew that a lot of boys from age four to seven experimented with pretending they were girls, but after that they grew out of it and became perfectly normal boys. He believed reinforcing gender roles would help Rae move on from it sooner, minimizing social isolation from acting outside socially acceptable roles. It was back then that Gerald had begun calling Rae 'Son' all the time in order to help 'him' know who 'he' was... a *boy*. "*Raymond*..." Gerald tried starting again, but saw Rae's eyes roll at the use of her given name... a name she'd *insisted* people call her for several years. "*Now* what?"

Rae closed her eyes and tried to keep from reacting. "*Nothing... sorry. Go ahead.*"

"*Look...*" he tried for a third time. "I know you had a 'girl phase' when you were younger, *OK? Lots* of little boys do! But that was *years* ago! Were did

all this come from out of the blue? Did you *read* about it somewhere? A book? A magazine? A *TV* show?"

Hearing that her father was simply not going to accept that she had never stopped wanting to be a girl, that she'd just learned to hide it better, Rae started looking for the lie that would end the cycle of disbelief, the lie that her father would be willing to believe over the truth. She'd been conditioned to lie about herself for over half her life. "OK, I *may* have seen a TV show about it and remembered back when I was younger dressing up like Marie and how happy it made me, so I thought I'd *try* it again. I've just been so *sad* lately and I... I just wanted to be *happy* again is all! That's the *truth!*" In point of fact it was only half the truth, but she used it to justify her reply as being honest, even though it included a major lie of omission.

Seeing her swear to it being true, and seeing no tell-tales of a lie in Rae's eyes, Gerald accepted the answer. "OK! Now we're *getting* somewhere!"

Gerald then spent the next few hours explaining to Rae just why she couldn't become a girl and remain a Christian, quoting Deuteronomy and First Corinthians as justification. By the end of their talk Rae became convinced, through her father's honest belief, that trying to become a girl was more than just a *choice*... it was a *damning* choice that she could not live with and retain her *faith*.

On that day, Rae swore to herself never to dress like a girl again, nor ever desire to express or enjoy her femininity. She began to revile it like an ex-smoker who becomes an anti-smoking activist. It would be lifetime later, twelve years when she would be more than twice her age at that time, before Rae would even *think* to re-examine her father's convictions and conclusions.

Chapter 10 - No Escape

Once the situation at home had been resolved, Rae and her father had moved on to the problems at school. While it was too late in the year, and her grades too poor to salvage her Math scores, she worked with her teacher Mrs. Gruber to try and pass all her other courses. Staying in at recess helped, and Rae's self esteem began to improve as her grades did. Though she still had no real friends, Dan having moved on to other friends he had more in common with, her involvement with the school's strings orchestra made her feel like she *belonged* somewhere.

When she was first given the choice of what instrument to play, she outright rejected the violin as the high tone made her think it was too effeminate and settled for the lower and richer tones of the viola. She had considered cello or bass, but their size would make carrying the instrument home impractical given her slight build and weak muscles.

Before the month was out, Rae was surprised by her mother's return. She was pale and drawn, and looked like she hadn't had a good meal in months, but was insistent that she and Marie return under her care as soon as she was able to locate an apartment. Unfortunately, having been out of work for months, the only place she could get was in a run-down apartment complex a mile from their schools. A five-minute walk to and from school was now going to be twenty minutes each way toting instruments and packs through one of the worst neighborhoods in town.

The first day Rae set foot in the apartment, she knew her descent back into hell was about to resume. Cockroaches skittered around the floors and cupboards and the rooms stank of cat urine, burned rope, and dried garbage. When she was told she would once again be sharing a room with George, she almost ran for the door, but her need to believe in forgiveness for her own sake forced her to give him the benefit of the doubt that he was capable of changing through his ordeal.

After moving in, Rae was immediately subjected to constant nagging from Laura regarding her failing grade in math. That she'd managed to turn all her other grades around seemed to matter little if anything to her mother. Worse yet was her spring concert. Rae had worked hard to improve with the instrument and was proud to show off her nascent skills for her mother. As soon as she finished her first piece however, she looked over at her to see she was writing on the pad she used to make grocery lists; apparently paying no attention whatsoever. Her only recently built up self-esteem shattered in an instant.

It was then that Rae came to understand that it wasn't just her *father* who showed preferential treatment toward Marie. Numerous times Rae had been required to go to band concerts for her sister, and Laura had insisted that she pay attention and listen, but felt no urge to extend the courtesy to Rae. Marie wasn't even required to attend her concert and in fact didn't go, opting instead to hang out with her friends. The double standard made Rae long once more to be a normal girl, if only so her mother might love her as much as she obviously did Marie. Feeling guilty about it as soon as she felt the desire only served to grow her burgeoning self-loathing over her apparent lapse of faith.

While she still saw her father on weekends, now it was only every *other* weekend and only really for a day and a half; Saturday morning through Sunday evening twice a month, less on holiday weekends or when he had Guard Drill. After their talk, Rae had made a bond with him that she'd longed for over the years, thinking it must be the father-son relationship she'd never had before. She idolized her father and looked up to him as the infallible icon of what it was to be a man and father.

She didn't realize until decades later that what she felt was not what she thought it to be. Boys *pattern* themselves after their fathers; *girls* treat them as infallible icons of masculinity... and in Rae's eyes Gerald was the living icon of masculinity... classic 'daddy worship'. She hated her mother for taking her away from him, only to seemingly ignore her once she did. To

Rae it was like she was just doing it to deny her father time with his children like she'd heard *other* divorced mothers did to punish their ex-spouse.

As the year pressed on, eventually George came home and did seem to be changed. His scars made Rae cringe and the first time she saw him she politely excused herself to run for the bathroom to vomit once more; thoughts that it could have been her in that furnace that scarred him so badly overwhelming her. Their first night sharing a room was uncomfortable, but Rae shoved the feelings away and tried to just accept that he could change.

Her stepfather Todd had *definitely* changed, but not for the better. He seemed to be bitter and angry about everything, and his temper towards Rae was now on an even shorter fuse. As Rae finished Elementary School and passed on to Middle School, Todd took it upon himself to see to it he made a 'man' out of her. His first effort came when Rae was sitting in her room learning to draw circuit diagrams the way Gerald had shown her. He'd shown her about what he did at work, electronics, taught her basic circuitry, and she had even entered the fifth grade science fair with a project that proved Ohm's Law... only to lose to a kid who had a 'tornado machine' that his parents had obviously built for him.

"Hey!" Todd shouted startling her. "Quit piddle-farting around with that crap! I found something *fun* for us to do!"

Irritated at him degrading what her father had taught her, Rae knew better than to argue and put down her pencil. Following him out of the apartment, he nearly pulled her arm out of her socket dragging her toward a group of boys standing in a circle near an adjacent apartment building. "What's going on, Todd?" she asked nervously.

Smiling as he led her up to the group, he turned to her and winked. "Boxing lessons!"

Shaking her head as she backed away, Rae knew boys liked things like boxing and therefore so should *she*, but the very thought of it made her stomach churn. "Um... I don't think..."

"No!" he snapped. "You *don't* think! I think! You *obey!* Get me? Boxing will make a *man* out of you and get those kids at school to *fear* and *respect* you! You'll *love* it!"

"Yes, sir." she replied quietly as she stepped forward again. Watching the boys take turns putting on the boxing gloves and try to hit each other, Rae felt nauseous. She tried to watch them and study their movements, and after listening to the father that was leading the impromptu 'class', she learned all there was to know about boxing as far as she was concerned. She *loathed* it from the depths of her soul.

When the instructor finished explaining how to stand, he asked for a volunteer. Before Rae knew it, Todd pushed her forward.

"You wanna give it a try, young man?" the instructor asked.

Looking back at Todd timidly, she gulped and nodded as she turned back to him. "Y-yes, sir."

"Ever *box* before?" he asked as he started putting the gloves on her hands. Seeing her shake her head, he nodded in understanding. "It's OK! No time like the *present!* Don't *worry!* In *no* time you'll be knocking 'em *flat!*"

After he put the gloves on her, Rae was terrified to see a boy eighteen inches shorter than her approach who seemed to be far more skilled than she. "Um... can't I start out practicing against a *wall* or something?"

"You learn by *doing!*" the man said with a smile. "Now, you remember everything I said?" Seeing her nod, he pushed the smaller boy forward. "OK, then... *fight!*"

Rae didn't even see the punch coming it flew so fast. The next thing she knew she was laying on the asphalt cowering in the fetal position while the boy stood over her.

"Come on, *punk!*" he shouted. "Get back *up!*"

Shaking her head, she tried to crawl away only for Todd to stand her back up, flip her around, and shove her back toward the boy.

"*Hit him!*" Todd shouted.

Rae couldn't bring herself to raise a fist at a boy who looked like he was maybe eight years old when she was nearly twelve, even though he'd already flattened her once. It went against every instinct in her body. Instead she tried to cover herself the way the instructor had shown, only for the boy to bat her gloves away easily and pummel her in the stomach. Her legs collapsed under her as she crumpled to the ground once more, this time landing on her butt. Undaunted, the boy shot a fist out toward her now unprotected face and landed a blow directly on her nose. Rae yelped as her head shot back and landed hard on the asphalt once more and everything went fuzzy.

"What a *wimp!*" one boy in the circle shouted.

"He fights like a *girl!*" another voice added.

"He don't fight at *all!*" a third offered. "And he *squeals* like a girl, too!"

Laughter erupted around the circle as Rae's opponent stood over her and waited for her. "Want some more, *bitch!*"

"*Hey!*" the instructor interrupted. "That's *enough*, William! Fight's *over!*"

As Rae was stood back up by the instructor, she felt a trickle run down the back of her neck. Trying to reach behind her head, she realized the man was still trying to get the gloves off of her.

"You *OK*?" he asked as he pulled one glove off.

Reaching around with her one free hand, she ran it along the nape of her neck and looked at it. Red smears lightly covered her fingers and Rae suddenly felt dizzy again.

Pulling the second glove off, the instructor noticed what she was looking at. Looking up at Todd, he nodded down to Rae. "I think you need to take your son to a doctor. He might have a concussion."

Grabbing Rae by the shoulder, Todd yanked her back toward the apartment. "He's not *my* kid!" he spat. Pushing her on as she tried to staunch the bleeding and trying not to cry, Todd slapped her hand away from the back of her head and placed his hand against the back of her neck, his fingers gripping around it forcefully until she whimpered. "Don't you *ever* humiliate me like that *again*! When I tell you to *do* something, you *do* it! When I yell 'jump', you don't ask 'how high', you jump ten *feet*! When I tell you 'hit him', you *kill* him! *Get* me?"

"*Y*-yes, sir!" Rae answered through her poorly repressed tears.

"And enough of this '*Yes, sir*' shit!" he added as he pushed her toward the stairs. "I ain't your *old man*!"

Climbing the stairs, Rae got lightheaded again. "I don't *feel* so good."

"Suck it *up*!" Todd barked, as he pushed her toward their apartment door. "That which doesn't *kill* you only makes you *stronger*!"

As Rae lay down in her bed that night, George leaned down from his upper bunk. "Hey? You *OK*?"

"I'm *fine*." Rae sniffed.

"Guess you got pretty roughed *up* out there today, *huh*?" he commented as he sat back on his bed and secured his facemask in place to help the burned skin smooth back out. He'd taken it off before leaning over the bunk because he knew it scared Rae.

"I'm *fine*." she said again.

"Look, I know he's kind of a *dick*... but he *does* have a point. You learn to *defend* yourself, you won't get beat *up* anymore!"

"*OK*." she answered, hoping it would just end the conversation. Her head hurt and she'd gotten sick twice, once after dinner, which made Todd yell at her for 'wasting perfectly good food'.

When Trish finally was able to return home, things settled down into a routine, but Rae was hollow inside. The only thing she had to occupy herself with was her viola and electronics. It irritated Todd to no end as he felt such things weren't 'manly' because as he put it, "Even *women* can use a soldering iron! That's why they call it an *iron*!" His joke wasn't well received by Trish, Marie, *or* Rae... and even George only chuckled once before going back to his dinner.

Todd's next effort at getting Rae to 'man up' came when he took the family up to Frenchman Lake in northern California. Knowing the trip was coming, Rae was inspired to make something useful. She knew Todd was going to make her go fishing with him. He'd made it clear that on their first night, the only dinner she would *get* would be what she *caught*. Eager to show him up, Rae did some research at the library, examined some circuits, took inventory of the parts she'd collected, and began building a device. It was

just a transformer, a few transistors, some capacitors, resistors, a speaker, a switching potentiometer, and a battery. When Rae was finished though, she was sure she would be eating.

The day of the camping trip came and, as promised, Todd had Rae inflate the small raft. Before they set out on the water, Rae stopped him.

"So, when I catch a big enough fish to have for dinner, we're done and we can come back to shore?"

"That's the *plan!*" he smirked.

"*Promise?* As soon as I have *enough?*"

Becoming irritated, he sighed. "*Yes! I promise!* Now get your skinny *ass* in the *boat!*" After the two got situated, he then rowed her out into the middle of the lake. When he got where he wanted to be, he was surprised when he saw Rae pull out her school backpack.

"What's in *there?*" he demanded.

"My fish caller." Rae answered as though it were obvious.

"A *fish collar?*" he spat. "*What,* is it supposed ta' wrap itself around their *necks* or somethin'?"

Sighing, Rae removed the metal-cased device and plugged two thin wires into it that led to a wax-sealed Tupperware container holding the speaker. Flipping on the switched potentiometer, she carefully placed the container on the surface of the water next to the boat and adjusted the dial until it was where her research told her it should be. Then, without even putting bait on the hook, she dropped her line into the water and began little jerking motions with the pole that made the hook splash on the surface.

"You really expect that to *work*?" he ridiculed after watching her for a short time in stunned silence. "There's only *one* way to catch fish and that's..."

Less than a minute later, Rae's pole suddenly jerked downward. Before Todd could say a word, Rae had yanked back on the pole and the five-pound trout was dangling from her short line. Getting the net, she scooped the still flailing fish into it and dropped it, net and all, into the small metal bucket they'd brought. "*Ick!*" she huzzed as she unhooked the line from its mouth. Putting her pole down, she picked her speaker up out of the water, noticing three more trout investigating it while several others splashed around the surface nearby. Putting her sealed speaker back in her bag, she turned the device off, put it back in her backpack as well, and settled into the front of the boat. "*Done. Can we go back now?*"

Todd could only watch in shock. When she asked to go back, having spent less than five minutes 'fishing', his face took on a look of pure anger and hatred. Leaning forward slightly, Rae thought for a moment he was going to hit her, or worse throw her in the lake. Considering how bad a swimmer she was, Rae was never happier than that moment to be wearing a life jacket. Stopping himself, he was about to object when he remembered the promise Rae had extracted from him before setting out.

"*Fine!*" he snapped as he grabbed the oars and turned the boat around. "Little *smart-ass!*"

Grumbling the entire way back, Rae just turned around and watched them approach the shore with the biggest smile she'd had on her face in months. As she sat by the fire that night eating her trout, the only fish anyone would catch all weekend, she swore it was the best tasting fish she'd ever eaten.

Rae should have known better than to show up a bully, however. While she had her moment of glory, it was short-lived. Todd wasn't just *mean* anymore; he became vindictive and *cruel*. After they got home, he decided that Rae should start doing more around the house, starting with taking out the trash.

In itself it was a minor task, but Todd knew that Rae could barely get a small piece of trash into the dumpster that served the complex, let alone an entire household's daily garbage. Even though she was now twelve, her body was still very underdeveloped. She still wore the same boy clothes she wore when she was ten, and no amount of effort was going to make her a big enough to reach the top of the dumpster anytime soon.

Day after day, Rae trekked the large bags down to the dumpster, only to have to spend half an hour trying to throw it in. Then when she would return, he would punish her for 'dawdling' and demand to know where she'd gone other than the dumpster. Meanwhile Laura just stood idly by and let him berate and belittle her, call her a liar, then slap her in the mouth for telling the unbelievable truth.

After weeks of the same thing, Rae was fed up. She knew now that no matter *what* she did Todd was going to punish her, so the next night that Rae was ordered to take out the garbage, she just dragged it outside and dumped it over the railing. Waiting a few minutes, she then went back in the house and to her room.

Not more than a minute later, Rae heard a knock on the front door. Listening carefully, she heard a man tell Todd what Rae had done and that she'd scattered garbage all over the parking lot. As he charged into her room, Rae just closed her eyes and waited until Todd grabbed her and dragged her out by the arm into the living room.

"You little *shit!*" he shouted. "Think you can get *away* with that crap with *me?*" Clapping her across the ear hard enough to knock her to the floor, Rae just took it with her eyes shut the entire time. "Damn it, *look* at me when I'm talking to you!" Slapping her head again, he kept doing it until she finally opened her eyes. "You're going down there *right now* and pick up *every* piece of trash in that parking lot! *Get* me?"

Nodding, Rae blankly walked outside and began picking up trash. She was still at it after eleven that night when Marie was sent down after her.

"Ray? Todd says you can *stop* now." she said softly.

"I'm not done." Rae retorted emptily.

"*Damn* it, Ray! Why do you have to *defy* him? You *know* he's going to win in the *end*!"

"It doesn't matter." she answered without feeling, her voice hollow and dead. "No matter what I do he's going to punish me, so I'll just give him real reasons to do it."

"He'll *kill* you one of these days!"

"Then he'll go to jail." she said emotionlessly as she tossed another piece of garbage in the dumpster.

Grabbing Rae by the arms, Marie saw Rae flinch with pain before seeing that where she had grabbed was now black and blue from Todd's rough handling, along with the side of her face. "*Sorry!*"

"I'm fine." she said blinking the pain away. "I need to get back to work. There was probably ten times as much trash out here as I dumped."

Seeing Rae walk around her to go get another piece of trash, Marie could only watch as the husk of her once happy sister ignored her pleas.

By one in the morning, Laura came down herself to put a stop to it. "*Ray!*" she yelled a whisper. "Ray, it's one *AM!*"

Stopping to look at her mother, her vacant eyes only briefly paused. "Not done. If I go back and it's not done he'll just punish me more."

Exasperated, she too tried to grab Rae by the arms and saw her wince briefly. "I'm not going to *hit* you Ray! Why did you shy *away* from me?"

Unable to answer her mother's question, believing that if she said anything bad about Todd then her mother would just take his side, Rae just stood there and waited for her to let go as she ignored the pain in her arm.

Shaking her lightly, Laura asked again only to see Rae wince once more. Turning the girl's side to the streetlight, she saw the large bruise from Todd's grip on her arm as he dragged her out of her room. Not saying anything, she let go only for Rae to resume her trash collection. At a loss for what else to do, having seen the cold vacant look in Rae's eyes, she walked up to her, took her by the hand, and directed her bodily back to the apartment where Todd was waiting outside the door.

"Stupid little *jerk!*" he growled quietly as Laura guided her into the living room. "You've *ruined* your mother's night off!"

Turning on him, Laura's eyes flared with anger. "I think there's *enough* blame to go around for *that*, Todd! *Raymond?* Go to *bed!*"

Hearing her mother even halfway stand up for her, Rae glanced back at her and managed a weak smile before her vacant expression returned and she went directly to sleep without even taking off her clothes.

The next morning Rae was bleary eyed as Laura woke her and examined her arm. The bruise was going down, but still looked painful. "OK Ray, go get breakfast."

Making her way to the table, she saw Todd there wolfing down food in a hurry to leave for work.

Looking sideways at her, Todd stopped eating and pointed at the chair across from him. "*Sit!*"

Doing as she was told, Rae stared vacantly across the table at nothing.

"Your mother and I worked out a *deal*." Todd began as he shoved more food in his mouth. "You're so *smart*, she figures the best punishment for you is to make you write an essay on why what you did was wrong. So by the time I get home from work, I want to see a thousand words on the subject! *Get me?*"

Nodding vacantly, Rae had no intention of using her intellect to continue Todd's game. No matter what she did, he would find fault with it, so she would do nothing to appease him. Watching him leave, she got up and returned to her bed, falling fast asleep in minutes.

"*Ray!*" Marie shouted, unwilling to shake her by the bruised arm. "Ray! You *have* to get *up!*"

Finally rousing, Rae looked at her alarm clock and saw that it was after four PM... Todd would be home from work in ninety minutes. Stretching, she leisurely made her way to the bathroom. "Taking a shower." was all she said.

"You don't have *time!*" Marie whispered a yell as she tried not to wake their mother who was working graveyard shifts at the casino and so was still asleep. "You need to get that *paper* written!"

Closing the door behind her, Rae tossed her towel over the bar and stripped. Examining the bruise as she got clean, it had ugly red blotches all over it and hurt whenever she put it under the water stream. Showering until the water ran cold, she then toweled off and headed for her room to get dressed, noticing afterwards that Todd would be home in about half an hour. Sitting at her table, she got out a piece of paper, wrote her boy name on it, then put in the subject title, 'Why Throwing Trash on the Ground Is Wrong'. Once done, she proceeded to stare out the window.

When Todd got home, he demanded to see Rae's paper. When he saw she'd written nothing all day, he ordered her to bare her butt as he pulled his belt off. After five cracks and Rae wasn't showing any signs of even noticing them, he fumed.

"*Now!*" he growled. "You have until I get home from work *tomorrow* to finish, or you get *twice* as many! *Get* me? I will *not* put up with any more of your *defiance!*"

Rae nodded and went to go lie on her bed. The next day Rae was up much earlier, but she still just stared out the window all day and refused to write anything, even when Marie begged her to. When Todd got home, he bared her butt and gave her ten cracks of his belt.

"*Now!*" he growled again. "You now have until I get home from work *tomorrow* to finish the paper, or you get twice as many as *that!* *Get* me?"

Returning once more to her bed, Rae endured the punishment for two more days, by now having gotten several blisters on her butt. On the morning of the fifth day, Marie came to her again. "*Ray! Please!* Just write the *paper!* You can't *take* much more!"

"I feel nothing. I can take anything he can dish out." Rae said emotionlessly.

"No, you *can't.*" Trish said from the door to Rae's room. "You *push* him on this, he'll take it as a challenge to his manhood and do whatever it *takes* to win! Believe me..." Trish paused while she shuddered. "...I *know!*"

"I don't care if he *kills* me. I *won't* submit to him." Rae grumbled.

"Eventually, he'll hurt me bad enough that they'll take him to *jail!*"

"*Oh?*" Trish countered. "And *then* what? You think your *mom* will let him rot there? She'll spring him and then he'll be gunning for you for even

worse! And if she *doesn't* bail him out, he'll get them to arrest *her* for letting him *do* it! He'll just tell them he had her *permission!*"

"I don't *care.*" Rae stated vacantly.

"Oh... it's *fine* for you!" Trish answered back. "You have your *dad* here! But what about *George* and me, huh? You think this only affects *you*? *They* get hauled off, George and I get sent off into the *system!* You know what that's *like*? *We* do! It's a *nightmare!* And now with these *scars?*"

Seeing that there was no way to win, that game was rigged from the beginning, Rae shook her head and picked up her pencil and began to write. She wrote all day as the blisters on her rear ate into her concentration. The whole time either Trish or Marie sat next to her and encouraged her. They brought her lunch so she could keep working and Rae only stopped twice to go to the bathroom. By the time five thirty rolled around, Rae had only sentences left to go as Trish spotted Todd's truck approaching.

"*Hurry!*" she urged the twelve-year-old. "He's *coming!*"

Marie took up position watching for him while Trish continued to push Rae onward. Just as Todd reached the door, Rae put her pencil down.

"Done."

Quietly, the two cheered Rae's accomplishment. When Todd sat down at the kitchen table, he once more called for Rae as he took off his belt with a grim visage.

Rae came out holding a small stack of papers. Snatching them from her hands, Todd began to read. Rae wasn't sure if he'd even be able to understand some of the words she'd used, but the count was all that mattered... exactly one thousand words as demanded.

Seeing Rae standing in front of him with her thousand-yard stare, he took the papers, crumpled them up, and dropped them unceremoniously into the garbage can. Then with a twisted sneer, he growled at her, "Take out the *trash!*"

Chapter 11 - Hitting Bottom

Rae's life was not entirely devoid of happy moments. One moment though, meant the most to her through that entire time. It was during the summer before Rae started Middle School when Laura decided to take the children to Disneyland and just let them be happy kids once more. While George's and Trish's facial scars tended to get them stared at in most places, all that seemed to vanish in the place Rae called '*my Laughin' Place*'. One incident more than any other stood out to Rae as a completely happy moment.

Upon entering the Haunted Mansion, Rae found herself with Trish... the one member of her new family that Rae had never had a chance to really get to know very well. She was an eighties teenage girl, but jaded and hardened by life and experiences no teenage girl should ever have to go through. Upon entering the park however, Trish's hard exterior seemed to melt away and the little girl inside her had come out to play.

Making their way through the Mansion, Rae enjoyed being able to point out all the scary-funny things to Trish. When it came time to *ride* through the rest of the attraction, she was surprised that Trish wanted to ride with *her*. The two sitting alone in the darkness as they entered the seance room, a disembodied head chanting to bring the spirits out, Trish turned to Rae.

"*Ray?* H...how do they *do* this?" she asked with a hint of fear in her voice.

Rae simply shook her head and smiled. "I *really* don't know, Trish! *Honest!*"

"OK, now I'm *totally* freaked out!" Trish almost giggled. "You're like the smartest person I *know*, and if *you* don't know how they do it..." Her voice trailed off as they moved off into the party scene in the great hall.

Rae giggled as Trish buried her face in Rae's arm and a warm feeling came over her, an almost motherly feeling of wanting to sooth Trish's fears away. "It's *alright*, Trish! *Look!* You're *missing* it!"

Trish looked up and the two held each other and giggled like schoolgirls through the rest of the Mansion. As they rode the escalator up toward the exit, Trish gave Rae's arm a squeeze. "*Thanks.*" she said almost shyly, something completely unusual for the older girl.

"For *what?*" Rae asked seriously.

"For having *fun* with me!" Trish smiled. "*Thanks!*"

Rae blushed. "You're *welcome!* You can be pretty fun, *yourself.*" she stated shyly. It was the happiest moment of her life with the Eatons.

The only other source of happiness she had was when she'd gotten a viola of her own, and was getting quite good at playing it. Into it she poured all her pent-up sadness, loneliness, despair, and pain.

When the start of the school year approached though, Rae and her family were moving once again, this time *much* farther away; twenty three miles north and within a literal stone's throw of the California border. While it would mean that Rae would be going to a completely different Middle School than the one her sister went to, Marie would be moving on to the same High School all her friends were going to. Marie was allowed to decide for herself to live with their father Gerald whose apartment would still be in the same zoning district.

Once more, Rae felt she was only left the scraps that remained from whatever Marie got. Her older sister even got a new dress and black limousine to take her to and from the last dance of her eighth grade year. Rae meanwhile, had to beg to even be allowed to practice her viola at home, and Todd would only give her permission to '*screech that God-awful thing*' if she would accept extra work at home.

By the time school had ended, Rae was doing laundry, dishes, vacuuming, taking out the trash, and one day a week of cooking for the entire family.

Meanwhile, Marie and Trish only had to split four days of cooking between them and had no other chores, while George got to sit on his butt and descend back into the same stoner life he'd wallowed in before. It turned out the only new leaf he'd turned over was a *pot* leaf.

The new house had four bedrooms, and with Marie moving to their father's house, Rae fully expected to get a room of her own; something she hadn't had since the divorce. Yet *again* she was forced to bunk with George, just so Marie would '*always have a room to come home to*' in her mother's house. In reality it became a storage closet for Marie's ever-increasing store of things she'd kept that wouldn't fit in their father's apartment.

Rae's Middle School turned out to be over nine miles from their new home, meaning she couldn't walk or bike there and it was still a mile-and-a-half walk just to get to the bus stop. This meant Rae had to leave for school by six every morning and wouldn't return home until almost four. Her chore load wasn't diminished either, it was actually *increased* as Marie was no longer around to cook and there was a lot more floor-space to vacuum. That, on top of homework and not even being able to *start* her chores until late, meant Rae had no time to herself. She wouldn't have minded the chores if they were *asked* of her out of *love*, but they were *demande*d of her out of *obligation*, which just made it more work.

So, she stopped doing homework and her grades plummeted. To add insult to injury, Rae began puberty. While she was still trying to ignore her femininity, the effort was wasted. Rae could no more change her nature than a scorpion could. As she began puberty, her self-loathing went up. She wasn't growing facial hair yet, but the changes were altering the way she thought and felt, and her baby-blond hair was turning dark brown like her father's. With Todd on her case constantly, for the first time since she was a humiliated six-year-old, Rae contemplated suicide.

She knew exactly how she would do it, all prepared in advance. She would go into Marie's room and open all her boxes. Then she would go to her

mother's room and collect all her most feminine clothes. Dresses, blouses, skirts, underwear, slips, lingerie... *everything* that only *women* can wear... and pile them in front of the door to Marie's room. Lastly, she would take the large kitchen knife, go into Marie's room, slit her right wrist, and pour her blood into every box. While Rae's things had been ruined by *fire*, Marie's would be ruined by her own *blood*. Then, just as she would start to lose consciousness, she would collapse on the pile of her mother's clothes and let herself bleed out all over them. Her final act would be a giant middle finger to the femininity that taunted her all her life and to the two women in her life who could have supported her as a girl.

Still, she managed to keep the feelings buried and pressed on, if for no other reason than to try and save her soul in the vain hope that male puberty, however much she hated it at the moment, would finally erase her feminine nature once and for all. George also resumed trying to take Rae 'under his wing' and show her how to be like him. While he wasn't trying to hard sell her on drugs, alcohol, or smoking anymore, he was *persistent* with his casual offers and made sure Rae always knew she could get them anytime she *wanted* them.

He also tried to convince Rae that it was *Satan* that spared he and Trish from death, that he was just misunderstood and actually cared about people's wants and needs, while God was cruel, unfeeling, and willing to let people suffer for no reason when He could help them. Rae listened only because if she didn't he would get more insistent. She didn't *believe* him, but her own pain and suffering, and God's apparent lack of action to help her, made it a hard row to hoe. She just held to her faith and hoped that someday it would be worth it, if not in *this* life then in the *next*.

When Rae got her first report card back, Todd hit the ceiling. He belted her bare butt until Laura made him stop before he drew blood. As it turned out, he drew blood anyway on the last swing as the buckle got loose and tore into her tender flesh. After that, arguments between Laura and Todd became even more common than the ones between Gerald and Laura just before

she had divorced Rae's father. Seeing the writing on the wall as a ray of hope for the future was the only thing that saved Rae from carrying out her suicide plan.

The following weekend though, Marie was asked to 'baby-sit' Rae while Laura and Todd went out for the evening. Rae found the suggestion utterly humiliating. Now two years *older* than Marie had been when she was allowed to baby-sit on her own alone, her mother saying that Rae needed a babysitter was just insulting. George and Trish were spending the night partying at a friend's house, so Marie blamed Rae once more, this time for ruining her weekend plans with her own friends. Sniping at her at every turn, Marie finally pushed Rae over the edge.

It was time to make dinner and Rae was mesmerized watching the fire burn, when Marie came over and kicked her in the still-sensitive rear.

"*Hey! Time for you to make dinner!*"

Rae nearly snapped right then, but kept her cool. "*Ow! You're getting paid to take care of me like I'm some helpless infant! You do it!*"

"I told Mom I'd make sure you did *all* your chores!" Marie argued. "*You're down for cooking tonight, so get cracking... Cinder-fella!*"

Rae's repressed anger at Marie and the rest of the world boiled over. She already hated Marie for having the life Rae had always wanted and here she was, taunting her as though she was Marie's actual *slave*. Jumping up, Rae slowly walked into the kitchen and pulled out the large kitchen knife deliberately and cruelly. *What's murder when you're about to commit suicide? What... am I gonna get eternity times two in hell?*

Marie's eyes grew wide as saucers as she saw the look on Rae's face and the knife in her hand. "*Ray... no! Ray! Put that back! Raymond! No!*"

She took off after Marie with a vengeance, fully prepared to die that night just to see the look on Marie's smug little face as she plunged the knife into her belly, wiping that superior smirk off her face forever. "You think you're just *so much better* than me, *don't* you!?" Rae screamed as she faced off across the kitchen table from her. "You think that because you're Mom and Dad's favorite little *princess* that I'm *dirt* beneath your *feet*!"

Charging around the other side of the table as Marie stayed ahead, the two switched sides. "*I should have been just as important! Where were you when I had my concerts? I was at all of yours! I had to be! Who got the limo for a fucking Junior High dance! You! Who got to be pretty? Who got the love? Who got my room when you didn't even need one here? You! You spoiled, selfish, egotistical, bitch!*" Trying to charge under the table instead of around it, Rae only managed to switch places with Marie again. "God's fucking *gift*, right?"

Marie was speechless and beyond comprehension. Just trying to keep her distance, she finally found a break and tore off for her room, screaming the whole way as Rae followed on her heels. Slamming the door behind her, she felt Rae plow into it. "*Ray! Stop this! Please!*"

Seeing that Marie was now beyond her reach, she decided she would just execute the second half of her suicide plan. *That way, Mom comes home... I'm dead... Marie has to explain what happened... and Mom never forgives herself or Marie. Finally, justice at last! Mom gets to see that her perfect little princess has a few stains on her halo! Blood stains!*

Rae went to her mother's room and began piling Laura's clothes on the floor. Since she had no access to Marie's boxes, she would have to make do with what she had available. As she did so, she yelled her pain across the house, making sure Marie could hear her so she would have to be the one to explain to their mother *why* she was dead. Tears soaked her cheeks as she grabbed hand-fulls of her mother's clothes and threw them in the pile.

Just as she was getting close to the end, she felt the knife yanked from her hand. Spinning quickly, she saw Marie holding it toward her.

"Stay *back*, Ray!" she threatened. "Stay *away* from me or..."

"...or *what, stupid!* I was going to *kill* myself *anyway!* You'll just make it suicide by *sister!*"

Realizing her plan had a fatal flaw, she threw the knife out of the room.

"Why are you *doing* this, Ray?"

"Didn't you hear a *single* thing I *said?*" Rae bawled. "I just poured my *soul* out to you, and you... you weren't even *listening?* You have *got* to be *kidding!* How self-centered can you *get?*"

"Pretty self-centered when someone's trying to *kill* you, if you want to know the *truth!*" Marie shot back. "Ray! What the *hell?*"

Dropping to her knees, Rae bawled. "*Kill* me! *Please!* I just want to *die!* I can't keep going *on* like this! I... I can't *do* it! *Please,* Marie! Just *kill* me and get it *over* with and tell everyone I killed *myself!*" Finally collapsing to the floor in a fit of despair, Rae curled up and waited to die.

When at last Marie began to process the litany of grievances Rae had spewed at her during the chase, none of them seemed to be much of a big deal to her. Slowly though, she began to see how it looked from Rae's perspective, and how a lot of little things could add up to quite a lot. "You... you're *jealous* of me?"

"No... no *shit,* Sherlock!" Rae replied through sobs. "You... you have... *everything...* I... I ever... *wanted...* and... and can... never *have!*"

Looking down at the pitiable person sobbing on her mother's bedroom floor, Marie furrowed her brow. "Is... is this still about the *girl* thing?"

"Yes!" Rae cried. "Did... did you think it would just... just suddenly *go away* one day? That... that I'd wake up... one morning and just be a... a *normal* boy? It's been twelve *years* Marie! I'm a *girl* and I can't make the feelings go away! *Please* God! Make the feelings go away!" her final words trailed off slowly through sobs of anguish.

Rae didn't know how long she lay there after Marie slowly backed out of the room, but at some point Marie came back.

"Ray? Um... dinner's ready."

Lifting her head up to look at her sister, she puzzled over the words. "*Huh?*"

"I... I made dinner." Marie repeated. "*Hungry?*"

Getting up slowly, her emotions spent, Rae could barely stand. Looking at the pile of her mother's clothes, all she could do was sigh.

"*We'll* clean this up." Marie offered. "We have all *night*. Let's eat, *then* we'll pick this up. *Meanwhile*, we can *talk*. *OK?*"

Nodding, Rae stumbled toward the dining room, finally dropping herself into her chair completely exhausted. "Thank you."

Marie stopped and looked at Rae. "For *what?* *Dinner?*"

Shaking her head, Rae sighed as Marie served their food. "For... for everything you've ever *done* for me. For being my best friend growing up... for letting *Harmony* be my friend too... for the sleepover... for... for everything *nice* you've *ever* done for me. *Thank* you. I don't *deserve* it."

Sitting next to Rae, Marie bumped shoulders with her. "*Hey?* What are big sisters *for?*"

Giggling as she took a bite, Rae quickly chewed and swallowed. "Making *little* sisters feel *inferior*?" Her eyes popped wide open as she covered her mouth with her free hand, hardly believing she'd just *thought* that, let alone said it out *loud*.

Marie stopped just as her first bite was about to go in her mouth. "Wow, Ray! So you like *Freudian* slips, *too*?"

"It's... it's not about *clothes*." Rae defended herself. "They're just the most *visible* part of being a girl. *My* problem is that I *think* and *feel* like a girl."

While Marie chewed, she pondered Rae's thoughts. Finally she asked, "How do you *know*?"

"How do I know *what*?"

"That you think or feel the way a *girl* does. I mean, how *can* you know? How would *you* know how a girl thinks or feels?"

"Because I can *see* and *hear*." Rae explained. "I see how other girls act. I hear them talking to their friends when they don't even notice me. I... I *understand* them."

"That doesn't make you a *girl*, Ray!" Marie laughed. "It just means you're paying *attention*."

Looking at her sideways, Rae rolled her eyes. "It's *more* than that! No *guy* would *get it* if he heard girls talking about being excited about a *dance*."

Shrugging, Marie conceded. "OK, I'll *give* you that, but not *all* guys are like that. *Some* might get it."

"Do you *know* any boys that do... or ever *did*?"

"Yeah! *You!*"

"*Besides me!*"

Thinking for a moment, Marie couldn't think of an example. "I *guess* not."

"What does a little *boy* do if you hand him a *doll*?" Pausing a moment, Rae answered her own question. "He either starts flying it around the room like a jet *plane*, or starts using it like a *hammer* on an imaginary *nail*! *Me*? I gave your doll Mandy milk and burped her! So if I *didn't* play like a *boy* would, and I *did* play like most *girls* would, it follows that I think like a *girl*!"

Taking a bite, she moved to her next point. "Then there's *mannerisms*. Girls naturally have a more open and expressive body language. I have to *suppress* mine! *Interests*? I actually *like* fashion, music, chatting, reading, and a *bunch* of other stuff that girls *like* and boys *hate*. Ergo... *girl-brain*!" she finished as she pointed at her head.

"OK, but what about *feelings*?" Marie asked curiously. "You say you think and *feel* things the way a girl does. How can you possibly know *that*?"

Rae nodded as she finished another bite. "Girls are *very* open with their emotions. Boys can hide them *easily*. It took me *years* to figure out how to hide mine, and I *still* mess up and let them show too much. That's why boys *hate* me... I *act* like a girl and *talk* like one. Let's play a game real quick. What do you think when I say... 'puppies and kittens'!"

Marie couldn't help but smile around a mouth full of spaghetti.

"*See*? Girls think of cute things and we almost *all* go, 'Awww!' It hits us right in the *heart* and we can't *help* but show it! Beyond *that*, I just sorta *know* I feel the way a girl does. Ergo... *girl feelings*!" she finishing pointing at her heart. "I can't *help* it. I've *always* been this way and I guess I always *will* be. It's probably just the way I was *born*. To *suffer*." she finished sadly.

"You're happy *some* of the time." Marie pointed out.

"Only for *moments*." Rae shrugged. "*Whatever* happens, I'm still stuck with a boys body and a girl's mind. All I can do is either go with being girly all the time or endure having to always act against my nature and *hating* it." Turning sad, Rae chided herself for forgetting herself. "I... I'm *supposed* to be doing the *second* one, but it's a lot harder than I *thought* it would be."

Marie stopped eating a moment. "So, you're gonna stop acting like a girl?"

Sighing, Rae shook her head. "I'm not *acting* like a girl... I *am* a girl... up here in my *head*, I mean. I... I'm *supposed* to try and *make* myself act like a boy, even if I have to *fake* it and fight it for the rest of my *life* and *hate* myself the whole time. I *have* to."

"Because you're a *guy*!" Marie insisted.

"No, because I have *faith*." Rae corrected her. "If I wasn't a *Christian*, I *wouldn't* fight being a girl and I *wouldn't care* what anyone thought of it!" Lowering her tone, she sighed again. "But I *am*, so if I want to go to *Heaven*, I have to *fake* being a guy until I *die*. In order for someone like me to really accept that they're *supposed* to be a girl and not a boy, they'd have to believe that God made a *mistake* and they need to *fix* it, and I *can't* believe that! It's... it's something I'm *burdened* with that I have to *endure* for the rest of my life, but God said that He'd never test our faith beyond our ability to endure, so I have to *believe* I can do it. Otherwise, I might as well just *kill* myself."

Marie thought a moment more before she picked at one of Rae's points.

"What do you mean, 'someone like you'? Are there *other* boys you know of that think they're girls?"

"From what I guess based on something *Dad* said once, there *must* be enough people like me that they make TV shows, magazines, and books about it." Rae noted as she finished her spaghetti. "I also read once that a lady like

me that was born a boy got an operation that gave them a body like a woman and they took chemicals to help them *stay* that way. This was back in the fifties when Dad was still a *kid*! I guess it'd be hard to do and expensive though, so *I'd* never be able to afford it, even if I *wanted* it."

The two making their way into their mother's room to pick up the mess after putting away the dishes, Marie hit on another wrinkle. "*Hey!* I can *prove* you're a guy! *You* don't like *boys*! *You* liked *Harmony*, so you *must* be a guy!"

"*Slight* correction... I *love* Harmony... but that's one *weird* part that's really *confusing* to me." Rae pointed out as she folded clothes and started putting them away. "At one time thought I'd start liking guys at some point, like *you* did when you turned eight or so, but I never *did* and I started to like *Harmony* when I turned eight. That's *another* thing that shows I'm more like a girl. *I* started liking other girls at age *eight*. *Guys* usually don't start liking girls until *ten* or *eleven*. But here's the *weirdest* part! Do you have a boy at school you like?"

Marie nodded with a grin as she also folded clothes. "*Brian!* He's *so* cute!"

"OK, so how does he make you *feel*? Can you *describe* it?"

Thinking hard, Marie bit her lip. "Um... kinda *squishy* inside? That and..."

"...like your insides are flopping around like a fish out of water, and a warm feeling in your belly?" Rae finished for her.

"*Yes!*" Marie exclaimed. Pausing, she looked at Rae. "How do *you* know?"

"That's how Harmony makes *me* feel." Rae admitted sadly. Resuming her task, she continued. "Anyway, when guys like a girl it's *different*. They don't *get* that squishy feeling or the warm flip-flop thing. *That's* the weirdest part! I like *girls*... but I like them the way *regular* girls like *guys!*"

"How would *you* know how guys feel if they like a girl if you *aren't* a guy?"

"You forget I have to pretend to *be* one, so I had to learn how to *act* like one and I have to spend a lot of time *around* guys, so I hear what they *talk* about." Rae stuck her tongue out. "*Blech!* Just so you *know*, guys are even *more* gross when they think no *girls* are around!"

The two girls giggled before going back to their conversation. "*Anyway,*" Rae resumed. "When a *guy* likes a girl, they get all stupid or try to show off. They can't talk, think, walk, chew gum, or pretty much *anything* except stare and grin like an idiot. Either *that* or they treat her like *crap* because they're afraid to be seen as weak. That's *another* 'girl feelings' thing that shows I'm really a girl inside. I'd *never* be like that around *Harmony.*"

Marie looked at Rae quizzically. "That's the *third* time you've talked about how you feel about Harmony in the *present* tense, Ray."

"That's because I still *love* her. I think I always *will.*" Rae admitted shyly.

"But she broke *up* with you!"

"That doesn't *matter.* Her not wanting to be my girlfriend anymore doesn't stop how *I* feel about *her.* I... I just wanted her to be *happy.* That's more important to me than me being her... her girlfriend."

Hearing Rae's obvious heartache for the relationship that ended over two years earlier nearly broke her own heart. "That's so *sad!*"

Rae blushed as she started hanging up blouses. "It... it still *hurts,* but it's *worth* it for Harmony's happiness. Don't you think?"

"I *dunno,* Ray." Marie shook her head. "When you told me she broke up with you over the phone, I wanted to go over there and *slap* her, *especially* since she told you it was so she could date another *guy!*"

"A guy, not *another* guy. Remember, she wasn't dating *Raymond*, she was dating *Rachel*."

"Raymond... Rachel... What's the *difference*?" Marie quipped. "They're both *you*! It's just a *name*."

Shaking her head, Rae disagreed. "One's a *phony*, the *other* is me."

Marie shrugged dismissively. "Sorry, but I just don't see the difference."

Rae sighed and looked away. "Whatever. If it *matters*, I *feel* the difference. The *point* is, it doesn't *matter* why she broke up with me. Even if she *didn't* have a guy she was interested in, I wanted her to be *happy*, and *dating* me was making her *miserable* because we couldn't ever *see* each other... or even really *talk* to each other. *Mom* was *always* listening."

The sisters finished cleaning up the mess in silence after that, and by the time they were done they were both so tired they went straight to bed. The next morning Rae noticed that Laura was home and asleep in the master bedroom, having come home sometime in the early morning hours. Todd was nowhere to be seen. Making breakfast, she was surprised when Marie came out and gave her a hug from behind.

"*Thanks*, Ray." she said as she hugged her little sister. Sitting down beside one another, they ate in companionable silence until their mother came out as they were finishing up.

"*Morning*, Mom." Rae said. Already getting up, she poured her mother a cup of coffee and threw it in the microwave as she put her breakfast plate in the sink. "Can I get you some *breakfast*? I made scrambled eggs."
"No thank you, baby." she groaned as she sat at the table.

The three sitting together, Laura took a breath. "Todd and I are getting a divorce."

Filled with mixed emotions, Rae was both elated that the cruel man would no longer have a hold over her and yet sad on her mother's behalf. "I'm sorry, Mom." she lied convincingly.

"It's OK, baby." Laura weakly smiled at her. "It's for the best."

"I think you're right, Mom." Marie opined.

By the end of the month they were moving again, this time closer to Rae's Middle School. The three-bedroom house would be large enough for Rae to *finally* get a room of her own again.

Chapter 12 - Strange Days

While Rae's attitude at school improved some, the damage was done. So far behind on work, Rae was not surprised when she failed all but two of her first semester classes after the move. In addition, she was still getting beaten up on an almost daily basis no matter how hard she tried to fit in. She'd even volunteered to play flag football in PE, as stupid as she found it to be, but due to her lack of athletic skill, all she did was make the boys in her class, and her PE coach, despise her *more*.

One afternoon during lunch, she was doing her best to avoid the bullies, but she'd already caught the eye of three particularly aggressive boys. Trying to evade their obvious attempts at cornering her, she made her way around to the playground monitor.

"Mr. *Tyson*?" she said to the PE coach, trying anything to avoid the inevitable confrontation, "Jason, Ryan, and Blake won't leave me *alone*! I think if you don't *do* something they're gonna beat me *up*!"

The man looked down at Rae with a look of disgust on his face. "You better not start any *trouble*, Ray!" he barked. "They're all on the after-school football team! If I hear about you doing *anything* to get them in trouble, you'll have *hell* to pay with *me*!"

Rae watched the teacher turn and walk away, knowing then that she was completely on her own. Eventually, the three managed to corner her away from the sight of all but one playground monitor. Unfortunately, it was Mr. Tyson.

"Hey, *guys*!" Jason sneered evilly. "Time to play 'Smear the *Queer*'!"

Rae backed away and looked for an escape route, but the three boys had spread out and had begun circling her. "Why won't you just leave me *alone*!" she nearly cried.

"He's a total *queer!*" Ryan piped up. "In the locker room, he was looking at my *junk!* He's a total *fag!*"

"Ever see him biking home?" Blake added. "Faggot has a *violin* strapped to his back! What a *fairy!*"

Jason stared Rae down menacingly as he circled her. "I saw him looking at me in the locker room, too. Makes my *skin* crawl!" he growled.

"I... did *not.*" Rae pitifully attempted to refute their accusations. "And it's a *viola* not a *violin!*"

"*Listen* to him!" Ryan laughed. "He talks like a friggin' *girl!*" Making his voice high and whiny, he mocked her. "'No I *didn't!* It's not a *violin!*' Ha! Ha! Ha!"

Jason had enough and had worked himself up into a furious frenzy. As soon as Rae was looking the opposite way toward Blake, he charged in and slammed his meaty fist into her side. Seeing her go down in a heap, he chuckled. "*That's* what *faggots* get, *fruitcake!*"

Rae rolled over on to her back and looked up at him terrified. "I... I wasn't *looking* at you! I *swear!*" In truth when Rae had to change in the boy's locker room, her eyes were firmly planted on the floor, blushing and shaking with fear at having to change in front of boys. The only time she would look up was to avoid running into things. Just as she spoke, Blake swung a foot into her ribs.

"Quiet, *faggot!*" he yelled. At that all three began trying to kick her, literally while she was down.

Rae withdrew from their kicks as much as possible, looking for any way out of her situation. Looking past the boys, she spotted Mr. Tyson. Horrified, she watched him look right at her, smile, then turn and walk away. *He saw!*

Rae realized. *He saw and did nothing! He's letting them do this to me!* As the kicks to her ribs bruised several of them and Blake stomped on her left hand with his boot, Rae was overcome with anger at the betrayal of someone who was *supposed* to protect her. She turned her body slightly and kicked out, hitting Jason directly in the knee.

Watching him fall to the other knee as his leg gave out, she ignored the foot that smashed into her mouth and the spray of blood that followed, turning her feet to Blake; the next most threatening target. She knew once Blake was hurt, Ryan would run away at the prospect of anything close to a fair fight. Striking out again, she only just barely missed Blake's groin when he jumped away from her. Just then Mr. Tyson came running up.

"Didn't I *tell* you to leave them alone?" he barked at Rae as he helped Jason up, then had to hold him back to keep him from laying into Rae again.

"You little *faggot!*" Jason yelled. "I'll ef-ing *kill* you!" Mr. Tyson whispering something in his ear, Jason's furious expression changed to a smile, and then got serious. "Mr. Tyson? The fa... Ray here *started* it! He *threatened* to *kill* me! Pointed his finger at me like a *gun!*"

Rae lay on the cement bleeding as the two other boys began agreeing with Jason. By this time, a dozen or more other kids had shown up and were looking on. She wasn't even aware of the tears streaming down her face or the blood dripping away from her nose and torn upper lip. Her feelings were shoved so far down inside herself she could feel nothing. Two girls separated from the crowd and rushed up to her side as she tried to stand.

"Are you *OK?*" Jenny asked Rae as she took in the sight of her injuries.

Doris took Rae's arm and helped her to her feet, preventing the girl from falling as she put weight on her right foot and nearly collapsing from the pain. "Can you *stand?*"

Nodding, Rae tried to answer, only then noticing that she was crying. *Stop crying!* Rae screamed at herself. *No feelings! No pain! Boys don't cry!* Barely able to stop, she still couldn't talk without crying again, so she just nodded her head.

"Mr. *Tyson*?" Jenny spoke up. "I think he needs to go to the nurse. He's bleeding pretty *bad* and he can't stand."

Sneering at the girl, Mr. Tyson nodded toward the office. "Take the little f... take him to the nurse."

Mumbling under his breath as the two girls each got under one of Rae's arms to support her as they started walking together, Jason shook his head. "Little wuss needs *girls* to help him! *Wimp!* I barely *touched* him!"

Rae noticed that as the girls were helping her toward the door leading into the building, she felt nothing. Not pain, nor hurt feelings; just a big empty feeling inside. The two girls tried to let her know that they saw how the fight started, but Rae just shook her head. Even once in the nurse's office, Rae refused to answer when asked how it had happened. She knew protesting who started the fight would be meaningless. *Mr. Tyson is going to back up Jason's story... after all it was his idea... so it doesn't matter what I say. Why did I even bother to fight it? I should have just let them kill me.*

As she expected, after having her cuts tended and given an ice pack for her ankle, she was directed to the Vice-Principal's office for a disciplinary meeting. When Laura came in and saw Rae, then saw the other three boys with not a scratch on them, just one with an ice pack on his knee, she couldn't reconcile the sight with what she'd been told over the phone... that Rae had started a fight.

"Mrs. *Evans*?" Mr. Wainwright asked as he came out of his office.

"*Eaton*, actually." she corrected him as she shook his hand. "I re-married."

Gesturing for her to enter his office, Rae got up and limped her way in after her as she'd been told to do. Sitting in a chair to her mother's right, Rae settled in and zoned out.

"Mrs. Eaton," he began. "Your son Ray started a fight with the three boys seated outside. This meeting is to inform you that per the school's policy he is to be suspended for a minimum of three days."

"Mr. Wainwright," Laura said calmly. "You're saying that Ray *started* this fight. I'm sorry, but..." She gestured to Rae sitting next to her. "...all I see is that my son got beat *up*... and you're trying to tell me that he's *suspended* for getting beat *up*?"

"Mr. Tyson, the PE teacher on duty at the time as playground monitor, told me that Raymond came to him *before* the fight and told him that he was having trouble with Jason, Blake, and Ryan. That he then *threatened* Mr. Tyson that if he didn't do something that there would be a fight. That shows prior knowledge of his intent. Regardless, the school has a zero-tolerance policy regarding fighting. Anyone involved is *automatically* suspended."

Looking at Rae, Laura cleared her throat to get her attention. "Ray? I want you to tell me the *absolute* truth! Is that *true*? Did you *start* it?"

Shaking her head, Rae sighed. "*No*." She knew that she was effectively calling Mr. Tyson a liar, which would not be well received, but she wasn't going to lie to protect people that hated her. "I told him that they were bothering me and that unless he did something I'd get beat up."

Turning back to the Vice-Principal, Laura held up her hands. "*Well*? There you go! He was trying to *warn* the teacher and was *misunderstood*!"

They were interrupted with a knock on the door. The school secretary poked her head in. "Mr. Wainwright? Jenny Williams and Doris Hastings are *still* insisting on seeing you regarding Raymond Evans and the other three boys."

They're insisting that Rae didn't do anything to provoke the fight and that the other three boys were responsible."

Looking up from his papers he shook his head. "Dismiss them back to class, Ms. Redding. I already have a written statement from Mr. Tyson."

"*Hold it!*" Laura interrupted. "There are *witnesses* that back up my son's account, and you're *still* going to suspend him?"

"We can't take the word of two twelve year old *girls* over that of a *teacher*, Mrs. Eaton." he insisted. "If we started doing *that*, we'd be *overwhelmed* with students trying to run the school." Looking back to his secretary, he nodded. "*Dismiss* them, Ms. Redding."

Seeing the door close once more, Laura turned back to him after writing the girls' names in her notebook. "What about the three boys? I assume *they* get suspended too, since they were *involved*?"

"That really doesn't *concern* you, Mrs. Eaton. I just need to go over this form with you, have you sign it, then you can take your son home. His suspension is effective as soon as we're done here."

After an hour of arguing, Laura only managed to ensure that the three boys would also be suspended, but the school was adamant that Rae could not return to school until that Friday and no amount of arguing would overturn their position. Eventually, she got up and leaned over his desk.

"*Alright*, Mr. Wainwright! I'll *take* Ray home, but I'm telling you right *now* that I am *not* done! He did *nothing* wrong, and I'm going to *do* something about it, if I have to write to the *Superintendent*! If these two girls are *right*, and you suspended Ray for *nothing*, I'll see to it that they *clean up* this school, starting with *your job*! So you *damn well* better be sure you're in the *right* on this!" Grabbing Rae's hand and helping her up, she led her out of the building. "Don't *worry*, baby. You're not in trouble with *me*, alright?"

Nodding absently, Rae nearly cried at how touching it was that her mother had fought so hard for her, even though Rae knew it was a futile effort from the start and could only make things worse for her later. Leaning against her mother's arm as she limped out of the school, she also thought about Jenny and Doris and how hard they'd tried to stand up for her, too. She couldn't fathom why they would when she knew they'd both *ignored* her all year.

Rae spent those three days resting and healing, but her heart was an empty husk. She had no friends, her mother was busy working, and no family came to see her. After a while she'd concluded that her father must have been too *embarrassed* to see her because she'd been beaten up and the boys that did it barely had a scratch on them; that he didn't *want* to see her because she hadn't fought back *hard* enough.

When Rae returned to school that Friday, she tried to find the two girls, if only to try and find out why they had taken her side. Finally, during lunch recess, she caught up with them.

"Jenny! Doris!" Rae puffed as she ran limping up to them as they made their way to the steps in back of the school where most of the kids sat during lunch when the weather was nice. "Hang on a second!"

The two girls stopped and waited while Rae caught her breath. "Well?" Jenny asked impatiently.

"I... I just wanted to... ask you something." Rae panted. Taking a deep breath, she managed to catch her wind. "Why... why did you help me... on Monday? Why did you try so hard... when you *knew* Mr. Tyson... wouldn't like it?"

"Mr. T's a *jerk*." Jenny spat. "But he's the *boys'* PE coach, not *ours*. We only *did* it because it was the *truth* and we didn't like the idea that Jason and them could get away with practically *killing* you! But *now*..." Her voice trailed off as she looked over to Doris.

"...now your *mom* is raising a big *stink* and *we're* in trouble!" Doris finished for her. "The school sent our parents notes that we were 'involved' in a fight at school! Now *we're* in trouble and it's all *your* fault!"

"I... I'm *sorry*!" Rae tried to apologize. "If you *want*, I'll get my mom to tell them what *really* happened so you won't be in *trouble* any more."

The two friends looked at one another a moment before Jenny shook her head. "Don't *bother*! You'd probably just make it *worse*!" Turning away, the two girls left Rae standing alone.

Alone was how Rae remained the rest of the school year. When she got her final report card it was dismal, but it did say that she was promoted to the eighth grade. Her English grades had been so poor that at one point her English teacher had called for a parent conference and tried to say that Rae was illiterate. Laura literally laughed in the teacher's face as she recounted times Rae had read to her from the encyclopedia when she was only four years old. After that, Rae promised to do her work and managed to drag the grade up to a D.

The loneliness was getting to Rae, though. With her mother gone all night working graveyard shifts at the casino and sleeping during the day, and Marie hardly ever there, Rae had no one to help battle the depression that weighed on her so heavily. Though Marie was still living with their father, her room was like it had been in their last home, a place to store the things she wanted to keep but didn't have room for in her father's small apartment. It would turn out to be a temptation too strong for Rae to deny.

At first, Rae would just go into Marie's room to look at her things as a way of trying to remember happier times when she wasn't so lonely. Soon, she was overcome with the need to be herself and happy again, even if only for a short time, and began dressing in her sister's clothes and playing with Marie's old toys. Each time though, she'd feel guilty and promise herself it would be the last, but depression would inevitably drag her back time and

again. She even dared sleep in one of Marie's old nightgowns more than once.

She got a computer for her thirteenth birthday, something unusual in the mid-eighties for a teenager to get. It helped mitigate the depression and loneliness and reduced her trips into Marie's room. Rae learned how to make programs on it and spent most of her summer staring at the twelve inch black-and-white TV that she used as a monitor.

At some point her mother began dating and had gotten together with a man named Jim. Rae was put off by the man, not because of her experience with Todd, but because he was almost the polar opposite of her ex-step-father. While Todd had tried to force Rae to be his idea of a man, Jim barely acknowledged her existence.

What baffled her though was that her mother had chosen to date an atheist. Rae couldn't for the life of her fathom why her mother could even stand to be around him, let alone date him. She and Laura briefly moved into his duplex during the summer, but before school began Laura moved the two of them and the rest of Marie's things into a house that was less than a mile from her father Gerald's apartment. This put her back in the area zoned for her sister's old Middle School.

On the first day of eighth grade, Rae was jus getting settled into AV class in third period when a note was delivered to her teacher.

"Raymond Evans?" he asked scanning his new students, not yet knowing who she was.

Raising her hand, Rae curiously waited.

"Take this note and head to the Office, please. Take your things with you."

The class 'Ooooo!'ed as a trip to the Office usually meant you were in trouble, but Rae had only been in two classes so far, and nothing bad or strange had happened. Gathering her things, she took the note and walked down to the Office. It was odd that she felt so familiar with the school, due to the fact that it was built identically to the one she'd spent seventh grade in. So while she knew every hallway, at the same time it was a completely different place.

Waiting in the Office, it wasn't long before the school secretary had her come up to the counter surrounding the office desks.

"We contacted your old school to get your records transferred here." she began. "When we got them we found that Mr. Wainwright, the school's new Principal, had rescinded your promotion to the eighth grade."

All the blood drained from Rae's face and she felt dizzy. *I knew when Mom fought with the school nothing good would come of it.* she thought as her breath came short. *Mr. Tyson was so mad at me that Jason and the other guys were forced to drop football after school because they got suspended. I knew he'd find a way to get back at me! Mom threatening Mr. Wainwright's job didn't really help, either.* Forced to sit or fall down, Rae backed away from the counter until the back of her knees hit the chairs that lined the walls of the office. Dropping into one haphazardly, she heard the secretary talking but couldn't understand her over the ringing in her ears.

"Raymond?" she puzzled over Rae's reaction. "I take it then that this is news to you? You *should* have been informed after the decision." As Rae looked up at her, the secretary noticed the pale look and called for the school nurse.

The next thing Rae knew she was lying on a table with a blood pressure cuff squeezing her left arm. "What *happened*?" Rae asked sleepily.

"Your blood pressure dropped very low and you passed out." the nurse explained casually. "Has this ever *happened* to you before?"

Shaking her head, Rae tried to clear her thoughts. "N... *no*, ma'am."

Once she'd recovered, she was called into a meeting with the school's Vice-Principal, Mr. Davidson. He'd called for the meeting with her based on the reports of violence, threats, and anti-social behavior from her last school, and wanted to make it clear to his new student that any violence on his campus would not be tolerated. Rae stated her side of the events as calmly and as unemotionally as possible, hoping that perhaps somehow this man, who seemed to be nice, could do something about her plight.

Mr. Davidson could not for the life of him reconcile the things written in the record about this child with the girl sitting in front of him. Though there was nothing he could do to change Rae's rescinded promotion, he knew he had to do something to help. "Ray... may I *call* you Ray?" Seeing her nod, he continued.

"Ray, I'd like to *try* something. You *seem* like a smart and responsible boy, and I need someone to hand out playground equipment during lunch. You'd be excused from your fourth period class five minutes early each day, and your lunch would be paid for by the school. In *exchange*, you would have to see to it that all the equipment like basketballs and whatnot were checked out properly and returned *after* lunch. If anything isn't returned, you'd have to bring the names of the students who failed to do so to me after lunch before going on to your fifth period class. That means you'd be stuck in the equipment room all through lunch, though. You'd even have to *eat* there. Does that sound *agreeable*?"

Hearing that she'd have the opportunity to not be in the lunch area or out on the playground to be bullied brought a smile to Rae's lips. "Yes, sir!" she answered without hesitation.

By the end of the day, Rae had her new seventh grade schedule sorted out and was headed home with a note from Mr. Davidson explaining the situation. She knew Laura would be mad at her for failing the seventh grade,

but she didn't *care*. *This* year she'd be free of torment at lunch and that would be *enough*. She even promised her mother that her grades would be much improved and she'd stay in at lunch to make *sure* of it.

The one thing she *didn't* do was tell Laura that her lunches would be free, so her mother continued to give Rae lunch money. Rae had never *had* an allowance, nor been allowed to have babysitting jobs like Marie had, so having access to her own money for the first time, she made plans of what to do with it. Feeling guilty about taking her sister's things, and admitting to herself that she *couldn't* stop, Rae set out a budget for herself that would let her buy her *own* girl clothes and toys, so at least then she wouldn't be stealing them from Marie or her mother.

Laura *was* angry that Rae had to repeat the seventh grade, but she knew there seemed to be mitigating circumstances and that Rae seemed to have a more positive outlook than in previous years. In the end Laura felt that perhaps just having to repeat a grade was punishment *enough*. Deciding to keep Rae out of trouble by watching her as much as possible, Laura restricted Rae from going anywhere other than school and home without her, and left it at that.

Months passed, and by the time Christmas break had arrived, Rae had over ninety dollars saved up and her grades were, if not *admirable*, at least *passable*, so her mother eased up on keeping Rae on a short leash. Three days before Christmas, Rae walked into the Macy's in the mall near to where she lived with her heart beating so fast she thought it would burst from her chest at any moment. Making her way over to the 'Young Miss' section, she almost fainted at the sight of so many things she wanted. It was then that guilt overcame her.

It's Christmas and here I am... thinking of buying gifts for myself. And not just any gifts... girl's clothes! Giving in to her desire to be a girl, no matter *how* bad she wanted it, felt shameful to Rae... tainted by selfishness at the time of year she was supposed to be *selfless*. Thinking about the nativity

scene she'd passed on the way to the mall, she was moved to instead spend her money on gifts for her mother and sister.

For her mother she found a pretty pair of earrings with amethyst gemstones. For Marie, she found a heart-shaped necklace with a ruby set in the center. They were expensive, especially Marie's necklace, and would leave her only cents remaining, but picking out and buying them felt like the most girlish thing she'd ever done and made her happy, so she eagerly handed the money over to the cashier. When Christmas came and Marie and her mother opened their gifts, Rae's heart was filled with joy.

It wasn't until school started up again that Rae's heart was shattered once more. She found Marie's necklace at their mother's house among the things that her sister left there that she didn't use. The earrings she'd bought her mother were still in the box they came in instead of placed with the rest of Laura's jewelry that she actually *wore*. Feeling like she'd wasted the money she'd saved on gifts that went unused and unappreciated, she fell once more into a depression and began to give in again to her need to be a girl at least part of the time by taking her mother and sister's things. This time though, it wouldn't go *unnoticed*.

Chapter 13 - Crisis, Lies, and Hope

Rae was sleeping peacefully one Saturday morning just after the end of the school year when suddenly she was awoken by her mother.

"*Wake up!*" Laura barked harshly.

Slowly coming back to awareness, she rolled over to see her mother standing over her with a nightgown Rae had taken in her hand; the burgundy one that Rae loved sleeping in but rarely had the courage to risk. She'd taken it a few nights before and had planned to wear it, but decided against it at the last minute. Unable to return it until her mother was gone, she'd hidden it in a drawer until she had the opportunity.

"Do you mind telling me why I found all *these* in your *drawers*, mister?" Laura growled.

Looking around the room, she saw that Laura had gone through all her drawers and pulled out every article of female attire she had taken from her sister and mother. Rae gulped as she tried to think of an excuse, but no lie she could conjure at the moment could explain it. *She's going to hate you because you deserve to be hated! You're weak!* "I..." Terror gripped her throat, cutting off the ability to speak. She imagined telling her the truth, that she still was a girl after more than a decade and rapidly approaching her fourteenth birthday, but fear that her own mother would hate her and what her response would be to the revelation kept her silent.

"*Get up!*" Laura yelled.

Slowly and timidly, Rae pulled herself out from under her covers and stood in front of her mother.

Laura hadn't caught Rae dressing as a girl in years and thought that it had just been a normal phase, but this time she was at a loss to understand why.

There were whole outfits, shoes included, piled at the foot of Rae's bed that she'd pulled from the girl's drawers. "I asked you a *question!* *Why* do you *have* these things?"

Rae just lowered her head and refused to answer. The worst thing her mother would do would be to take them away and punish her if she said nothing, but if she answered, far *worse* possibilities came to mind. She imagined being thrown out into the streets to starve, or beaten, or beaten and *then* thrown out, or committed to an asylum. Worst of all, beaten, condemned as a sinner by her own mother to her entire family so she would have no one to turn to, and *then* thrown out to starve. She didn't consider the possibility at all unrealistic. She'd read about such things done by seemingly loving parents, one even a minister, in a book she'd found in the public library about people like her.

"*Damn* it, Ray!" Laura shouted. "*Answer* me!"

Standing there contemplating her eventual fate, Rae was shocked when her mother sat down.

"Bend over!" Laura growled.

"Please... *please* no, Mom!" Rae begged.

"You ready to *answer* me, then?" she queried. It was Laura's turn to be surprised when rather than answer her, Rae opted to bend over her knee. Stuck now, she had hoped that just the threat of a spanking for her thirteen-year-old would be enough to force her to talk. Laura was now in the position of either backing down or following through. Rather than risk losing control of her apparently wayward child, she followed through.

Rae endured the pain easily enough, but the emotional hurt of her mother spanking her at thirteen after she'd been so badly beaten by Todd was too much to bear. Silently, tears escaped her eyes as her mother finished.

Looking at Rae sternly, Laura saw the tears and hoped that at last she might finally get some answers. "Ready to *tell* me now?" Seeing Rae dejectedly look away, Laura growled in frustration. "*Fine!* I'll give you ten minutes to let the *pain* argue with you and if you won't tell me *then*, you get it *again!*" Storming from the room, she left Rae to contemplate her options.

Lying on her bed, careful to lie on her side and not her rear, she considered once more just telling her mother the truth. The truth that after a decade of denial, self-recrimination, the beginnings of male puberty, and even on threat of losing her immortal *soul*, the *need* to be the girl she was born to be was stronger *now* than it had *ever* been. Again the stories of loving families torn apart by such a revelation, usually only ending with the death of the afflicted, haunted her. She finally resolved that no matter what her mother did to her, she would refuse to talk.

After an hour with spanking after spanking getting her nowhere, Laura was getting desperate. By now it was apparent to them both that her hand was hurting worse than Rae's behind, and continuing was only going to result in Rae outlasting her. She also needed her hands to make a living as a dealer. Using that as justification, and near to hysterics needing to know what was going on, she picked up her belt.

Rae lay in her bed, now desperate to think of *something* to tell her mother that would end the ordeal before Laura escalated to drastic means of *making* her talk. She could only think of *one* other reason that she would have girl's clothes in her room, based on something George had once told her, but telling her mother *that* was unthinkable. There were certain *things* that Rae would *never* talk about with her mother, no matter *how* bad her butt hurt or *what* other people said or did. Rae had her self-respect and she'd rather endure the pain than go *that* much against her nature.

When Laura came into Rae's room carrying the white leather belt, Rae wondered if she could make it to the kitchen and slit her wrists before her mother could stop her. "*No! God, Mom... no! Don't do this!*"

"You leave me no *choice!*" she shouted. "You ready to quit being *stubborn* and tell me?"

"I'm not being *stubborn*, Mom!" Rae shouted back through tears. "I... I *can't* tell you, OK? I just *can't!*"

"There is *nothing* you can't tell me!" Laura barked, as though saying it made it true. Seeing Rae start to bawl didn't deter her resolve. "*Talk* or *bend over!*"

Slowly, Rae inched toward her mother and bent over her knee. *I hate you for this, Mom!* she thought as she continued to cry. When the belt struck her rear, images of Todd whipping her until she bled pushed into her mind and before she could stop herself she heard the words coming out of her mouth. "I'll *tell!* I'll *tell!* *Stop! Please!* I'll *tell!*"

Letting her up after only one blow, Laura forced Rae to her feet. "*Well?*"

Trying to stop crying, think of any possible alternative excuses, and ignore the torturous images floating through her head of Todd, all at the same time, Rae couldn't even formulate words. "I... I... I..."

"Do I need to *force* the words out?" Laura yelled. "*Tell! Me!*" Pulling Rae back toward her knee only seemed to induce a panic in the child, but she didn't know what else to do.

"*No!*" Rae screamed "I... I use them... I use them to..." She looked at her mother with eyes of fury. *I'll hate you forever for making me lie for you again! Especially this lie!* Taking a breath, she closed her eyes and forced the disgustingly false words out of her mouth. "I use them to *masturbate*, OK? I *hate* you for making me say that!" It was the only thing she could think of other than the damnable truth.

Releasing Rae as though she were a rattlesnake, Laura pondered the answer. Finding it a reasonable explanation, and better than the alternative that she'd feared hearing, she accepted the lie as the truth. "Why would you *hate* me for making you say that? There's *nothing* wrong with that! *Everybody* does it! It's a perfectly *normal* thing to do!"

Rae looked daggers at her mother. *But it's a sin, isn't it? That's what they say, right? But I guess it's a sin you don't mind, huh? Not like the sin of me wanting to be a girl? The unforgivable one? Hypocrite!* Collecting herself, she forced the tears to abate. "Because it's *humiliating* to talk to your *Mom* about it!"

"Baby..." Laura sighed in exasperation. "You can tell me *anything*! I won't *judge* you!"

Liar! Rae screamed in her mind. *Oh! You are such a liar, Mom! You judge me all the time! You judge me less worthy than your other daughter! You judge me to be a boy and so you force me to be a boy against my will! You knew! You've always known and still you made me lie to you rather than accept the truth! You didn't need to make me tell you that lie! You knew exactly why I had those clothes! You just didn't want to hear it! I'll hate you forever for that!*

Seeing Rae fuming, she got up and started to leave her room. "When you're ready to talk, I'll be out in the living room."

As her mother closed the door behind her, Rae lay down on her bed and cried. *Maybe I should have just said it so she could just hate me and throw me out! It would be better than having to live like this anymore!* Thinking for a while, she seriously considered going out into the living room and confronting her mother with the truth and just let it happen. At least then she'd be rid of the guilt and maybe her mother wouldn't hate her after all. In the end, she convinced herself that the only way out was to go with the lie and endure the humiliation. Getting up, she collected herself and headed

out to talk. Seeing her mother sitting on the couch, she slowly inched her way in and waited to be acknowledged.

"Sit down, baby." Laura said softly.

"I... I'd rather *stand*." Rae said bitterly.

Letting the matter drop, Laura sighed and put out her cigarette. "So then... what do you *need*?"

Confused, Rae furrowed her brow. "*Need*?"

"*Obviously* you need some girl things." Laura said looking away. "I *am* curious... why the *shoes*?"

Blushing, Rae finally processed that she was asking what Rae needed for self-gratification like she was some disgusting teenage boy. Sitting without thinking, she hissed slightly when her bum hit the cushions. "Um... huh?" Rae asked as she tried to deal with the question.

"You had a pair of my shoes. Why *shoes*?"

Seeing that Laura was trying to figure out what shoes had to do with the lie, Rae thought quickly and remembered something Harmony had once shown her hidden in her father's garage. "Um... well... I once saw a picture of a woman, and all she was wearing was high heels." It was the *truth*, Harmony *had* in fact shown her a *Playboy*, but it had nothing to do with why the shoes were in her room. *It wouldn't do to explain that you can't look like a proper lady without shoes.* she giggled to herself before admonishing her own weakness.

"Oh." Laura replied, almost sorry she'd asked. Deciding she didn't need details, and that asking was making Rae more embarrassed, she waited.

Seeing her mother looking at her expectantly, Rae ran the conversation back in her head. "Oh. What do I *need*? Like in... what... girl... things?"

"Or anything *else*." Laura offered. "I noticed that you had some cardstock with cutouts of women from magazines and newspaper ads."

Blushing that her mother had found her secret 'wish list' of things she'd like to have and now mistook it for masturbatory material, she cleared her throat. "Oh. N... no. I'm *fine* with that."

"So then..." Laura pressed. "What *do* you need?"

"Um... could I... have... the... um... burgundy nightgown?" Rae asked tepidly, fully expecting her mother to explode at her for wanting it back. Seeing her mother almost flinch at the thought, Rae immediately regretted asking.

"*Alright*." Laura agreed. "Anything *else*?"

Afraid to push her luck and tip her hand that her excuse was nothing but a tissue of lies, Rae shook her head. "*No!* That's *fine!* I just..."

"Just *what*, baby?" Laura asked curiously.

"I just want this conversation to be *over!*" Rae admitted honestly. "I'm *sorry* Mom, maybe *you're* OK talking about this, but *I'm* not! It's... it's *humiliating* for me!"

"That means there *is* something else." Laura sighed. "Just spit it *out!*"

Rae's mind raced with what she thought she could get away with, but nothing was coming to mind that wouldn't give away the game. A *dress*? *She'd* never go for *that!* *Blouse and skirt*? *Same deal...* *can't be justified considering what she thinks it's for.* *Underwear? Bra?* Well, *she* knows *I* had some... but maybe *she* didn't think too hard about those. Finally Rae

cleared her throat and said the only thing she could think of. "Um... the *shoes?*"

"No, I need those for *work.*" Laura refused. "Why don't we just leave it at *that,* then?"

Nodding glumly, she realized she'd missed an opportunity to be free of her repressed feelings and cursed herself for it. *Now she's completely convinced this is just a sex thing! I should have just told her!* "OK." she finally muttered.

"But from now *on,* no taking *anything* of mine or your sister's, *right?*" Laura warned her. "You've had the chance to *ask* for what you need, so I don't want a *repeat* of today, *got it?*"

Nodding quickly, Rae stood up and cleared her throat. "I... I'll put the other things in the hamper then."

Summer passed quickly. Rae had saved up over a hundred dollars from her work at lunch and decided on her fourteenth birthday that she would finally treat herself and buy a few things that she was desperate to have but unable to ask for. Still feeling guilty over her weakness, she managed to walk out of the mall with a dress, top, skirt, slip set, and a package of underwear on the premise of buying them for her sister for her birthday. She'd even enlisted the help of a sales lady, who complimented her on being brave enough to shop for her sister, taking whatever the woman suggested was in style as though she were a clueless boy.

Riding her bike home, her purchases in her school bag on her back, she pondered whether the woman had known they were for her and had just played along, eventually dismissing the thought. *If she'd known, she wouldn't have played along, she'd of laughed at me and chased me out for being the freak that I am!* Carefully hiding them in her room, this time conscious of her mother's awareness and where she might look, she was

much more subtle. That nothing of hers or Marie's would be missed helped ensure the secret wouldn't be discovered easily.

When Rae thought of Marie that summer, her blood would boil. While Rae was pushed around at school and treated like a second-class child at home, Marie was still the golden child who could do no wrong. When Marie cut her finger, Gerald *literally* bandaged it up to her wrist. When Marie turned sixteen that summer, their mother gave her a car. When Marie gave herself a first-degree burn using Crisco while sunbathing to get a good tan, Gerald just gave her a talking-to about vanity and then pampered her for a week.

Meanwhile, when Rae sliced three fingers open on the lid of a can of cat food doing her required chores, she was yelled at for getting blood on the carpet and being careless. When Rae nearly aced her classes the second time through seventh grade, her parents just nodded and lectured her that it's what she should have done the first time through. When Rae asked for her own phone at fourteen when Marie had one at ten, she had to argue the point for hours before her mother relented, and only gave in when it would count as her fourteenth birthday present.

When school started up again, this time officially in the eighth grade, Rae continued to work in the equipment room and saved her money. Then life changed directions for Rae once more.

Her name was Marcy Anne Oxford and she played the violin. What first caught Rae's eye was her sense of style. While the other girls wore jeans and pullover tops, Marcy wore blouses and skirts. Even though the other girls had pierced ears, Marcy didn't and only wore only one piece of jewelry... a simple gold cross necklace. She wasn't just a *girl*, she was a *girly* girl and a proud Christian, like Rae *herself*.

It didn't hurt that Rae thought Marcy was the nicest girl in school. While she'd heard some girls being catty about the girl behind her back, making disparaging comments about Marcy's 'horse teeth' or her dated and

conservative clothes, Rae actually liked the girl's smile, having similarly large front incisors, and thought Marcy was always the best dressed person *there*, including the *teachers*. She also thought the girl's big brown eyes, light brown hair, and even her painfully thin build just added to her sweet and innocent appeal.

Eventually Rae noticed something else. Marcy was noticing her *back*. It was *subtle*, but she kept seeing the thirteen-year-old girl looking at her out of the corner of her eye when she thought Rae wasn't looking. Getting that same flip-flop and squishy feeling that had previously been reserved only for Harmony, Rae felt guilty at first that she was somehow betraying Harmony's memory and tried to ignore it.

When the feeling wouldn't go away though, Rae was surprised that she could like Marcy so much and yet was still in love and missed Harmony. She was doubly hesitant, because she wasn't just *attracted* to Marcy, she was *envious* of her. Marcy, without a doubt in Rae's mind, was *exactly* what *she* would have been if she'd been allowed to be a girl. After a week of noticing Marcy's continued glances, and that she didn't seem to be doing the same to any other kids in the orchestra, Rae finally built up the courage to find out if the girl liked her too.

Rae finished locking up her instrument quickly the next Monday. She managed to catch Marcy just as she finished packing up her violin.

"*Hey, Marcy!*" Rae began shyly. "You did really good on the coda."

At first, Marcy just stared at Rae blankly with her mouth hanging slightly open. Finally, she realized she was gawking and looked away with a blush. Clearing her throat as she picked up her book bag, Marcy shyly pushed a lock of her hair over her ear. "Thanks for the compliment... *Ray*." Looking toward the door, Marcy saw her friends waiting there for her with impatient looks. "I gotta *go*. See you tomorrow."

Quickly turning away and almost running for the door, her face beet red, Marcy joined the other girls and disappeared down the hallway. Rae just stood there embarrassedly and watched, believing she'd misjudged the situation. The next day however, Rae noticed Marcy was looking over at her much more often and less subtly, which only served to confuse her. Several times while playing, the two would cease looking at their teacher or the music, and would be looking at each other as though they were playing to just one another rather than with the rest of the class.

Rae decided she would try again, this time catching Marcy as she was leaving. "Marcy?" Seeing she was joining her friends again, Rae noted their disapproving looks but kept going. "Would it be OK to talk to you for a minute? We could we talk on the way to your next class."

Marcy looked at Rae, then at her friends, and finally back to Rae. "Um..." Pausing briefly while she seemed to be undecided who she should go with, Marcy eventually nodded at Rae. "*Alright.*" Turning to her friends, Marcy shrugged. "See you after *school*?"

The three girls glared at Rae before heading off on their own to leave Rae and Marcy alone.

"What's your next *class*?" Rae asked as they started walking.

"Choir." Marcy stated simply. After walking for a few moments in silence she asked softly, "So what did you want to *talk* about, Ray?"

"I... um... wanted to ask if you'd have lunch with me sometime." Rae answered shyly, her hands gripping her school binder tightly to her chest.

Blushing and looking away, Marcy looked like she was trying to hide her face behind her light brown hair that still had tinges of baby blonde in it like Rae used to have. "Um... *OK.*" she shyly responded after a moment. "*Tomorrow*?"

Rae nodded as her heart raced a hummingbird beat in her chest and her hands and feet went cold. "OK." Moments more passed in awkward silence. Trying to fill the air, Rae blurted out the first thing that came to her mind. "I... I like your *outfit!*" Wincing, she instantly regretted the choice of words, blushed, and looked away. *Guys don't use the word 'outfit', stupid!* she chastised herself. *You sounded like a girl! Why didn't you just ask to borrow it sometime!* "Um... what I *mean* is, I... I think it looks *good* on you. I... I *like* the way you dress."

Marcy smiled briefly before becoming self-conscious and looking down and away. "Th... thanks." As the silence between them threatened to turn awkward again, she looked back at Rae. "So... I guess I'll see you at *lunch* tomorrow?"

Nodding with a smile of her own, Rae looked back at her and their eyes connected briefly. Looking down as she felt faint, Rae gulped. "S...sure. See you t...tomorrow." Turning to the stairwell that would lead her to her next class of the day, Rae glanced back briefly toward Marcy to see her walking quickly down the choir hall... head down and clutching her own school binder tightly to her chest.

The next day, Rae didn't get to the lunchroom early, as she had to take a test in her Pre-Algebra class. So by the time she got to the lunch area, the place was already crowded. Not having to stand in line, she entered the kitchen as usual, picked up her tray, thanked Mrs. Gill for having it ready, and headed out to look for Marcy. Spotting her as she just started to sit at a table with her usual group of friends, Rae's smile evaporated. Stoically, she made her way toward the equipment room, making sure to pass by Marcy in the process, and was hurt to hear her just talking to her friends as if Rae wasn't even there, the plans of the previous day seemingly forgotten. Glumly, Rae went about the rest of lunch as usual... alone.

Orchestra class was right after lunch and, as typical, Rae was a few minutes late after needing to see Mr. Davidson about some un-returned equipment.

Taking her seat, Rae joined the piece on the next measure. Once comfortably playing by rote, she glanced at Marcy and saw that she wasn't looking her way. Waiting patiently, Rae watched her play through the rest of the period, but seemingly Marcy didn't even notice Rae was there. By the time class ended, she watched as Marcy packed quickly and almost raced from the room before Rae was done.

Days passed and the same thing was repeated twice more, but on Thursday Rae finished packing up early and made her way over to Marcy who was delayed. "Marcy?" Rae began tentatively. "Can we talk?"

Looking toward her friends who were just then gathering by the door, Marcy looked like she just wanted to run, but forced herself to sigh and nod. "OK." Once she was ready to leave, Rae walked with her to the door. "Lisa? I need to talk to Ray. See you after school?"

The other girl narrowed her eyes at Rae as though she could burn her to the ground with a look. "*Fine!* I'll save you a seat on the bus!"

Watching Lisa and the two other girls depart, Marcy looked sheepishly toward Rae. "*Sorry.* She's usually a lot *nicer.*"

Walking with Marcy toward the choir hall once again, Rae nodded. "I guess she doesn't *like* me very much." Afraid to ask the question burning inside her, Rae took a breath and forced herself to confront the issue. "I... I guess she's why you didn't join me for lunch on Tuesday? I saw you sitting with her and it looked like you didn't even notice I was *there.*"

With a shrug, Marcy looked away embarrassed. "I... I thought you changed your *mind.* I saw you go by me and didn't sit with us or even *say* anything, so I figured... um... that you didn't *want* to have lunch with me after *all.*"

"I had to get the equipment room open." Rae explained with a half-lie. While she *did* have to do her job, that wasn't the reason she walked by

without a word. "I *know* you know that I run the equipment room during lunch. You checked out a tetherball a few weeks ago."

"*Oh.*" Marcy exclaimed softly. "I... I didn't *think* about *that*. So then... do you eat your lunch *there* instead of in the *lunch* area?" Seeing Rae nod, Marcy giggled slightly. "I guess it was all just a big *misunderstanding* then!"

Giggling slightly along with her, Rae smiled. "I guess *so!* So... wanna try again *tomorrow*, then?"

Nodding happily but shyly, Marcy looked up and started stepping away from Rae. "I... I gotta *go!* *See you!*"

At first Rae thought something was wrong and took a step towards Marcy to find out what she'd done wrong, only to watch Marcy turn and dash into the girl's bathroom. Not wanting to look creepy standing outside the girl's room, Rae walked away. *I hope that nod was a 'yes'.*

Friday came, and by lunchtime Rae was almost sore with worry. She'd spent an hour and a half the night before trying to pick the best outfit for the day without looking overdressed. Realizing she was doing what girls do when getting ready for a date, Rae made herself stop and just picked a white button up shirt and black slacks almost at random. *I need to stop doing stuff like this!* she had thought. *Marcy likes Raymond, not Rachel! You're a boy, not a girl! Boy!*

A few minutes before the lunch bell, Rae excused herself from Mrs. Donaldson's class like normal and gotten her lunch tray. Standing by the door to the kitchen watching the lunch crowd gather, her worry evaporated as she spotted Marcy across the crowded hall holding a bag lunch. Making their way toward one another, Rae had to do a double take when she saw Marcy wearing girl's black slacks and a simple white blouse. The two looked like a matched set.

Making their way to the equipment room, Rae put her tray down to unlock the door using the key Mr. Davidson had given her. Seeing a student with a school key, Marcy was visibly impressed. When Rae began to set everything up, she was once more taken aback as Marcy began helping her, something she didn't expect. Setting up the table and checkout sheet, Rae opened the door to an already long line of waiting students. While Marcy took names, Rae got out equipment, handing out the entire bin of equipment students were allowed to have in record time.

Closing up, Rae noticed that they still had almost thirty minutes until the bell would ring again. Now alone in the equipment room, Rae moved her lunch tray to the checkout table as Marcy got a chair for Rae to sit in. Eating next to one another silently, the two occasionally exchanged glances before shyly looking away once more. After their food was gone and they still had quite a lot of time left alone, Rae finally turned to Marcy after a short silence.

"Thanks for *helping* me. You really didn't *have* to, but it was *nice* of you."

Marcy bashfully looked away. "I was *happy* to help you. Many hands..."

"...make light work!" Rae finished with her. "My *Grandma* says that all the *time*!" Giggling together, Rae stood up and returned her chair where it had come from. Sitting on the edge of the table, she watched as Marcy got up and sat next to her.

Sitting close together silently for a moment, Rae was almost overcome when she felt Marcy's hand slip into her own. Feeling the girl's hand delicately grip hers, the first time a girl had touched her since that fateful sleepover with Harmony, she looked over at Marcy. "I... I guess we could *talk* about ourselves. Get to *know* one another?"

Looking at Rae with an almost surprised look on her face, Marcy smiled warmly. "I... I'd *like* that! A *lot*!"

The two talked for some time about their families, the fact that Marcy lived and grew up less than a mile from her Aunt Vera's home, making both girls giggle at the coincidence.

"I sure wish I knew you back *then!*" Rae sighed sadly. "I... I could have really *used* a good friend like *you!*"

"Me *too!*" Marcy smiled, her hand shifting so that their fingers intertwined. "You're *really* nice! Not like *any* boy I've ever *met!*"

Gulping, Rae's eyes went wide. *You don't know the half of it!* Smiling weakly, Rae tried to push her girlish feelings aside, but found herself utterly unable to so long as Marcy was holding her hand. "*Thanks!*" she finally managed to squeak out. "Y-you're really nice, *too!* I also think you're really *pretty!*"

Blushing heavily at the compliments, Marcy looked away shyly. "N-no! I'm not *pretty!* J-just *average!*" Slowly looking back at the girl who'd begun running her index finger over the back of her hand still joined with her other, Marcy looked into Rae's smiling hazel eyes.

"Trust me!" Rae said softly. "You're really pretty!"

A moment later, the bell rang ending lunch. "Sorry I can't stay to help you *again!*" she apologized as she reluctantly pulled her hand free to gather her things, a giddy smile on her lips. "See you in *Orchestra!*"

"Yeah!" Rae sighed as she pulled out the sign-in sheet. "See you there!"

Once done with her job, Rae joined the class as usual. The two kept looking at one another off and on throughout class, each time they played Rae pouring all new feelings into her music, not sadness and despair... but *hope*. When the bell rang, Rae was happy to see Marcy waiting for her, Lisa and the other girls nowhere in sight. Walking together, they were much more

relaxed and easy in each other's company. "I wanted to tell you I had a *really* good time at lunch!" Rae cooed. "I... I *like* you, Marcy! A *lot!*"

"I like you *too...* Ray." she echoed. "A *lot!*"

"Us spending time together isn't going to hurt your friendship with *Lisa* and them is it?" Rae said worriedly. "I wouldn't want to get in the way of *you* and your *friends.*"

Marcy shook her head dismissively. "I think they just don't *know* you. I think if they *did*, they'd see you're a really nice *boy!*"

Almost wincing at the intended compliment, she forced herself to not hate hearing it. "*Thanks!* At least you don't have to worry about any of *my* friends not liking you! I don't really *have* any, but if I *did*, I *know* they'd like you!"

The two giggled together for a moment before they reached the choir room. "Well, *I* gotta go in, and *you* gotta get to your History class." Reaching into her binder, Marcy rummaged around a moment before pulling out a three-inch rectangular piece of paper and a pen. Writing on it, she handed to Rae. "Here. *Call me?*"

Looking at the little card, Rae's heart skipped a beat. *She gave me her phone number? Me?* Flipping the paper over, she saw it was one of Marcy's school photos. Shaking her head to clear it, she smiled and nodded. "I *will!* *Bye!*" Almost wanting to skip to class, Rae didn't even care that she got there late and got chewed out by Mr. Octavious. *Marcy likes me!* Nothing *could make me unhappy now!*

Chapter 14 - Descent

Rae hated her life. She was sick and tired of trying and failing to fit in and be what everyone else wanted her to be as she held her father's gun tightly in her hand. She knew it wasn't loaded, but more than anything at that moment, wished that she had just one live round in it for herself.

Only eight months earlier she'd been happy and hopeful. She and Marcy had just begun to grow close and she'd even thought about asking if she could kiss the girl she'd quickly grown to love over the course of six weeks. They'd spent nearly the entire weekend after their first lunch, and several occasions after school and on weekends, talking on the phone quite a lot and found they had much in common.

Their love of music was well matched, as were their basic beliefs. Like Rae's family on her mother's side, Marcy's family were Mormons. Even though Rae herself had been raised as a non-denominational Christian, they found that bond comforting in one another.

Then, quite suddenly and without warning, Marcy stopped showing up for lunch with her. In orchestra, Marcy was too ashamed to even look at Rae and each day, hurried out of the room to join her friends. When Rae tried calling her home, she never would pick up. Finally, after almost a week, Rae managed to catch her still packing up.

"*Marcy?* Did... did I do something *wrong?*" she'd asked delicately.

Stopping, Marcy couldn't even look Rae in the eye. "*No... you didn't do anything wrong. I... I'm sorry... I just... I can't...*" Resuming her packing, she shook her head. "I just *can't* spend lunch with you anymore."

Hurt at the lack of explanation, Rae pressed the point. "If I didn't do anything *wrong*, why can't we have *lunch* anymore?" Having seen Marcy glance over at her friend Lisa and the others briefly before finishing, Rae

felt her heart break. "*Oh. I see. I wouldn't want* you to lose your best friend because of *me*. I'll just leave you *alone* from now on." Turning to leave sullenly, she was surprised when Marcy followed her.

"It's not *just* them." the girl explained. "I... I found out Monday that we're *moving...*" She'd paused, looked down, and nearly cried. "...to *Las Vegas*. Next *month*."

The two approaching Lisa and Marcy's circle of friends, Rae came under assault. "Why are you still *bothering* her?" Lisa snapped harshly. "Can't you take a *hint*, geek? Get *lost*!" A host of rude comments had followed from the other girls.

"*Lisa!*" Marcy snapped back. "Just... just *back* off, *OK*? Let *me* handle this! You go *on...* I... I'll see you on the *bus*." Watching the rude trio retreat down the hallway, the two began walking together a short way before Marcy finally spoke up again. "I'm *sorry*, Ray. That was *mean* of Lisa to say."

"It's *fine*." Rae retorted vacantly. Her heart breaking once again, she'd already starting walling up her feelings. "I... I'm sorry you're *leaving*."

"Me *too*." Marcy sniffed. "That... *that's* why I stopped coming to lunch. I... I just... it *hurt* too much, and I don't want to get any *closer* to you before I have to... have to *leave*. I... I don't know that I'll *ever* be coming back here! So *see*? It's just going to hurt even *worse* next month when I leave if we don't just end things *now*."

Nodding as she gulped back a tear, Rae sighed understandingly. "*I see*. I guess... well, I was *hoping* to ask you to the Halloween *Dance* next Friday. I guess I know what the *answer* is."

Near to tears, Marcy nodded. "I'm *sorry*, Ray! I just... I *can't*, *OK*? *Please* forgive me! It'd... it would just *hurt* too much! I... I *can't* spend any more time with you! It's just making things *worse*!" Spotting the girl's restroom,

she stepped away from Rae. "I... I gotta *go!*" At that she ran into the bathroom just as she started to cry.

Devastated once more, Rae walked toward Mr. O's class in a daze only to get there after the bell rang. Unable to face anyone, and noting the empty hallways, her stoic 'boy' persona shattered and she too began to cry, running into the vacant boy's bathroom. Entering a stall, she collapsed onto the floor and cried openly on her knees. After several minutes, she heard someone come in and forced herself to stop.

"*Raymond?*" Mr. Davidson's voice boomed through the lavatory. "Come on *out*, son."

Standing up, she collected herself and exited the stall, tears still wetting her face. "*Sorry*, Mr. Davidson." she sniffed. "I... I *know* I should be in class. I'll *go*."

Stopping her retreat, he looked at her pitifully. "You should get cleaned up, first." Watching her go to the sink to wash her face, he stood next to her protectively. "Can I *assume* that your troubles are related to that *girl* you've been hanging out with? Ms. *Oxford?*" Seeing her nod and almost start to cry again, he grimaced. "I... I *saw* what happened. Broken heart at fourteen. Feels like the whole *world* just ended, right? It *happens*. You'll get *over* it. If it's any *consolation*, it happened to me *too*. Her name was Brenda. I got over it and so will you. Come *on*. Dry off."

Collecting herself, Rae dried her face on some paper towels and watched Mr. Davidson writing her a hall pass. "You... you don't have to *do* that for me, sir. I..."

"*Forget* it." he interrupted her. "No *reasonable* person would *expect* you to not need a minute to get yourself together after something like *that*. I'm not doing you any *special* favors I wouldn't do for *any* kid in this school, alright? *Here*." Tearing off the pass, he almost forced Rae to take it. "Just

remember what I *said*, Ray. I know it hurts like *hell* right now, but in *time*, less than you *think*, it'll *pass* and it won't seem so *bad* anymore. Now, grab your things and get yourself to class, *alright?*"

Taking the paper, Rae just nodded. "Yes... *yes*, sir. *Thanks.*"

Making matters worse, she made herself to go to the Halloween Dance. She knew that Marcy was going to be there too, but she couldn't not go and see what she looked like. Marcy dressed in a beautiful white silk gown with a gold garland halo over her head with paper wings hanging off her back. She looked like the angel Rae had come to know her to be and nearly broke her heart all over again to see what might have been. Then, one afternoon, she just didn't show up to Orchestra. The teacher took her name off the class roster and all the other second violins moved up a seat.

Marcy was gone.

To add insult to injury, about the same time Marcy stopped coming to lunches, Rae's PE class moved indoors for the winter. When they were *outside*, Rae could opt-out of team sports and was allowed to just run on the track alone. She'd become a decent long-distance runner and enjoyed the lack of interaction with the boys that still shunned her. Moving indoors meant dodgeball, basketball, wrestling, or some other team or competitive sport that would pit her against boys that were all too eager to target her for 'accidents', even on her own teammates.

One that she *dreaded* seeing was William, the same small boy that had laid her out twice in the informal boxing lesson almost three years earlier. He took a perverse degree of pleasure in arranging many of her 'accidents', and the coach never took them as intentional, even after dozens of incidents. When William couldn't *arrange* an accident, he'd wait until Rae was walking home from school and jump her then, almost always with his crony Robbie there to help.

Usually his assaults were limited to arm punches that left bruises, or a jab to Rae's ribs; just enough to knock her down so he could mock and ridicule her. Once Rae had gotten good at running though, his attempts to catch her were thwarted. Rather than give up, it seemed to fuel his rage against her, ensuring that once he *did* get to her, he'd make up for the evasions with a ferocity that equaled the sum-total of all the missed beatings combined... and Rae had been avoiding him for *weeks*.

As the school year progressed, Rae fell into a deep depression again. She'd considered telling her mother of the numerous attacks, but thought better of it and assumed Laura would see it as Rae being too weak and girly, thus seeing through her lies about why she had girl clothes in her room. Alone again, and with her mother blissfully ignorant of the regular assaults, Rae felt her only recourse was to just endure it until spring when she would be free to resume running during PE and then running after school to avoid him for the last four months of the year.

What she *didn't* count on was just how furious William would get at her once she was able to avoid all his attempts to beat her down, and to what *lengths* he'd go to keep Rae from escaping to High School without taking the built up assaults she was 'due'. The last full week of school would turn out to be yet another turning point in her life.

Rae came out of the school building Monday afternoon. She saw William had added another lackey to his retinue of oppression, Frank Jackson, the best sprinter in the school. The three of them were hanging around Mrs. Donaldson's car, suspiciously looking around and then down at the front passenger tire. Then William crouched down and seemed to be fiddling with something. Turning right around, Rae headed straight into the Office and asked to see Mr. Davidson.

After a minute waiting, the man came out to see what she needed. "Yes, Mr. Evans?"

"*Sir?* I just saw William, Frank, and Robbie... three guys in my PE class... doing something near Mrs. Donaldson's car. I think they were messing with one of her *tires*."

Not even hesitating, he led her back out to the parking lot in front of the school. The busses had already left and most of the kids had departed, so by the time they reached the car no one was around. "I don't *see* anyone here, Ray." he said with an annoyed tone.

Looking on the ground, Rae pointed at something. "*Look*, Mr. Davidson!"

Crouching down just as a school security officer walked up, he picked up a valve cap. Looking at the tire in question, he noted that the tire no longer had one, and it was obvious from the lack of road grime that a valve cap *had* been there *before*.

"Something *wrong*, Mr. Davidson?" the security officer asked.

"Seems *someone* was trying to deflate one of Mrs. Donaldson's *tires*." he replied as he looked over at Rae.

The security officer misunderstood and grabbed Rae roughly by the shoulder, but to the Vice-Principal it merely looked protective.

Unfortunately, Rae misunderstood as well. *Oh no!* she nearly cried. *He thinks I did it! I'd never do anything to Mrs. Donaldson's car!* In fact, her math teacher was one of her favorite teachers of all the teachers Rae had ever *had*. It was Mrs. Donaldson, despite Rae having failed math in fifth, sixth, and the first time through seventh grade, that had pushed to get Rae into her advanced math class; one of the few classes that she'd excelled in with nearly straight 'A's. She was one of the few teachers that really and truly believed in her, and saw Rae as something more than a 'trouble student', earning Rae's undying gratitude.

Standing back up, the administrator looked down at Rae with a serious expression. "I'm *sorry*, Ray... I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to come to the office tomorrow morning. You can explain *then*." What he'd *meant* was that she could explain what she'd seen and file a written statement about it, and that he was sorry it would *inconvenience* her, but that's not what Rae *heard*, nor what those *around* her heard.

For just as he spoke, Mrs. Donaldson reached her car and overheard him, misunderstanding as well. "Is there something I need to *know*, Mr. Davidson? Something wrong with my *car*?" she asked as she stared down at Rae.

"*No*." he answered simply. "Ray here was saying he *allegedly* saw some boys tampering with your car tire, but no one *else* saw them." Looking down at Rae, he nodded. "You can go *home* now, Ray. I'll expect you in the Office first thing *tomorrow*."

Had Rae remained, she would have overheard Mr. Davidson explaining fully what he meant and heard the trio glowing to each other about what a good child Rae was. Instead she walked home believing that her favorite teacher and the man she'd thought of most highly short of her own father believed her to be a liar and a vandal. She didn't even notice the pounding of feet up behind her until Frank had plowed into her and dragged her to the ground. Even as William pummeled her while Robbie and Frank laughed, she could barely make out what he was saying.

"...stupid sissy *faggot*!" he yelled as he smashed his fists into her ribs. "Maybe I should just *kill* you now so you can't tell him *anything*!" Stopping just short of breaking a rib, William relented and stood over her. "You get a *pardon* 'til *tomorrow*, fairy! You rat us *out*... you *die*!"

Just when Rae thought the assault was over, Robbie gave her a swift kick in the stomach. "*Pussy*!" he spat.

As Rae dragged her bruised body back off the ground, she was surprised when a hand was extended to help her up.

"Long time, no *see!*" Dan said as he helped her back to her feet.

Looking at the young man that had once been her friend in misery, she saw he was now almost six feet tall. His unruly mop of hair had been replaced with a mohawk, and he had several facial piercings. "*Thanks.*" Rae said vacantly.

"No *problem!*" Dan happily offered. "Still *getting* it, I see."

Rae nodded glumly as she looked him over. "Looks like *you* aren't, though."

"*Nope!*" Dan laughed. "I grew almost a *foot* in seventh grade, caught up with everyone, then decided to dole out some *payback!* That's what *you* should do! You're almost as tall as *me!*"

Shaking her head as she picked up her backpack, Rae sighed. "I... I *can't*. I'm an uncoordinated *weakling*. About all I'm good at is long-distance *running* and that's no good in a fight. Besides, I still don't *want* to fight. Fighting doesn't *solve* anything."

"Bull!" Dan bellowed. "That tired saying is a *lie* mothers tell their kids to get them to *behave*. Look at what fighting back did for *me!* Now instead of being the *prey*, I'm the *predator!*" Walking with her as she began her limp home, he shook his head. "OK, so you can't fight using *fists*. You're *smart!* Use that to figure a way to *defend* yourself!"

"It's no *good*, Dan!" she retorted. "Brawn *always* beats brains."

"Tell that to the *Japanese!*" he countered.

"You want me to *nuke* him?" Rae laughed.

"*Something* like that." he suggested. "I *know* William. He's good with his *fists*, but he's a total *chicken*! You one-up him and he'll run like a scared little *girl*! He tried messing with me when I would walk home from school two years ago. So, I took my toy pistol to school with me the next day and then when he tried to start something on the way home, I pulled it out and sent the little baby running back to mama! With a *toy*!"

Rae considered the idea, but shook her head. "No good. *One*, I don't *have* any toy guns... and *two*, I don't think he'd fall for the same trick *twice*. He's *dumb*, but he's not *retarded*."

Dan shrugged as they reached the corner where he would have to turn the opposite direction towards his house from Rae's. "Well, like I said... *you're* smart. Think of something or that meatball is gonna *kill* you one of these days! Catch you 'round, *Rachel*! Ha! *Still* not old!" He slapped Rae on the back as he went his own way.

Walking home, Rae's injuries argued with her the entire way. By the time she was nearing her mother's house, her depression had sunk lower than it had ever gotten and a terrible thought had occurred to her. *What if I don't use a toy gun?* Continuing on to her father's apartment, she knew he wouldn't be home for another few hours and Marie would be at Flag Team practice. Entering the vacant home, she headed straight for her father's bedroom and opened the drawer containing his pistol.

Holding the gun tightly in her hand, she removed the magazine and verified that the weapon wasn't loaded. Looking around and not finding where her father stored his ammunition, she sighed. *Too bad*. she mused. *If I had at least one round I could solve my problems right now*. Knowing she was bluffing even herself, that it was very unlikely that she could ever pull the trigger on herself, she suddenly found herself feeling something she hadn't felt in a long time. *Nothing*. She didn't hurt, she wasn't angry, she wasn't sad. She was just *there*... and *empty*.

Placing the handgun in her backpack, she left her father's apartment and headed back to her mother's house. As she expected, Laura was still asleep when Rae got home, so she hid the weapon in her room in case her mother wanted to see proof that she didn't have any homework. Because there were only four days left in the school year, all she had left to do were her final tests, but rather than study she went to her computer and created a program.

The program was simple, one that would boot her Commodore computer to a simple on-screen message, and then do nothing until restarted without the disk inserted. Entering the message in a series of PETSCII codes so no one could read it without executing it, unless they knew the table by heart as *she* did, and limited to twenty-five lines of forty letters each, she painstakingly entered in each character code into a data table.

```
To whom it may concern, (probably nobody)
In case something goes horribly wrong
and I die, I want a few things known.
I AM A GIRL. My REAL name is Rachel.
I've tried for years to be the good boy
that everyone wanted, but I suck at it.
I didn't try to die, but I don't really
care if I do. Life is hell. William has
been beating me up every day for a year
and lots of other guys for years back.
Sorry Mom, I lied about why I had girl
clothes. Sorry Dad, you never had a son.
Marie? I'm sorry for nothing. You're a
selfish bitch. My only request is to be
buried in a dress and for my tombstone
to say Rachel Michelle. If I don't die
but just go to jail, please note that I
didn't have any ammo with me, just 3 .22
rounds that won't work in Dad's gun. If
I'd wanted to use it for real, I'd just
use it on me. I only wanted to scare
William and make him stop hurting me.
I also didn't do anything to Mrs. D's
car; it was William, Frank, and Robbie.
Sincerely, RME (Rachel Michelle Evans)
```

Packing in as much as she could manage, Rae saved the program to a floppy disk and turned off her computer; leaving the disk in the drive in case anyone else turned it on. She determined the only reason anyone

would do that is if she told them to from jail or if she were dead and her mom or dad turned it on in some attempt to find out why she'd done what she did.

The next morning, she left for school with the gun disassembled in her backpack and the three rounds of useless ammunition in her front pocket. She stopped in the Office and was told to write a statement of what she saw with no explanation of what was going to be done to her once she'd given her side. She did what she was told, but Mr. Davidson wasn't in, so she left it with the secretary and went on to her first class as normal.

By the time it came to PE, the last period of the day, she had prepared herself for whatever William had in store, but nothing happened. She ran track while the other boys played baseball. The only thing she noticed was William glaring at her and pounding his fist a few times.

When the day ended, and with only three days left in the year, Rae started on her way home, this time knowing there was no use in trying to avoid a confrontation with William. With Frank on his side Rae couldn't run, and at lunch Mr. Davidson told her that she couldn't be believed about what he'd done as Rae was the only one to see them trying to mess with her teacher's car and all three denied doing anything.

She didn't ask if she was accused of attempting to vandalize her teacher's car, but Mr. Davidson didn't offer an explanation, as he had no way of knowing that it was what Rachel thought was going to happen. She ended the school day still waiting for the axe to fall, her emotions still so deeply repressed that she couldn't feel them. She didn't even feel the terror she had at the thought for being falsely accused again.

Leaving school, she stopped and reached inside her bag to put the barrel back on the handgun, and just managed to fit the three useless rounds into the magazine. Throwing the bag over her shoulder, she once more resumed walking home. She saw Frank, William, and Robbie walking towards her.

Stopping, she swung the bag off one shoulder and let it swing out in front of her in her left hand. Then, reaching inside, she took the weapon and magazine into her right hand, dropped the bag, and let it fall to the ground with a thump as it revealed her illicit cargo.

Frank saw Rae holding up the handgun in her right hand and, taking the magazine into her left, with ammo visibly loaded into it, his approach came to a screeching halt as his eyes bugged out and fear gripped his throat.

"What'd you *stop* for!" William barked at Frank. "Go *grab* the faggot before..." Just then William saw her slide the loaded magazine into the gun and pull the slide back to chamber a round. For the first time in his life, William knew real fear. When Dan had scared him with the toy gun, he'd suspected the gun wasn't real, but he didn't want to take any chances and never pressed the point. This gun he *knew* was real, *knew* was loaded, and *knew* was in the hands of someone he'd brutalized and threatened to kill. "Oh *shit! Run!*"

As the tormenting trio ran, Rae simply put the gun back in her pack, slung the pack on her back again, and resumed walking home. Rae expected the rest of the week would be smooth sailing, but failed to account for William's idiotic determination. Reasoning that if *he'd* had the gun he would have shot at his tormentor, William concluded Rae was too chicken to actually use it on him, even though he threatened her life. With Frank long gone, William stopped Robbie made his lackey double back with him as William told him his reasoning as to why they weren't in any danger. Robbie, none too bright to begin with, and willing to just obey for his own reasons, simply followed William's lead.

Rae had just made her way across the street and was about to turn toward home when she heard William and Robbie running across the street after her. Realizing her bluff had been called, she began to run, but knew that she didn't have enough of a head start to outrun them. While her endurance was much greater, their short-distance speed was faster than hers; enough

to catch her if they were close enough before her endurance out-distanced them.

Running behind a local pizza place her father frequented, she dropped her pack and slammed her back up against the brick wall at the back of the building. Pulling the gun out and hoping it would frighten them away again, she kept looking to either corner and saw that William was peeking around one, while Robbie was hiding around the other.

She didn't even feel the sting of the rock William threw that slammed into her arm. All she knew was that she was trapped, William was shouting that she had a gun, and that soon the police would be there and might shoot her. Briefly considering letting them, she resigned herself that if she turned herself in that *somebody* might take her seriously in regards to William's assaults. She did, after all, still have the bad bruises from the day before.

Calmly, she marched straight toward Robbie, the weak link. With a cold expression, she pointed the gun right at his head. Not unexpectedly, he screamed and ran, clearing a path for Rae around the building. Coming around the front, she saw Robbie running away, but William still standing on the opposite corner. Lowering the gun and switching it to her left hand and holding it by the barrel, she calmly walked right into the parlor, up to the counter, placed the gun down, and told them to call the police. Then she calmly sat at the table and waited.

When William saw what she'd done, he knew he had to be anywhere else or risk getting caught by the police. The bruises on Rae's ribs would be fairly convincing that he'd assaulted her repeatedly, and he hoped his absence would make her out to be a liar, so he quietly left the area.

Rae didn't know how long she sat at the table, nor when the police arrived. When she was questioned, she simply stated her name, her father's name, his work number, and that she refused to answer questions until he arrived. Throughout the ordeal, Rae still felt nothing. No remorse, fear, or pity.

Nothing. She'd pointed a gun at a child's head like it meant nothing to her. She *knew* she should feel *something* about that, but she was so traumatized that she simply felt nothing at all. She wanted the torture to end, and she'd ended it the only way she knew how. It was simple cold logic.

When her father arrived, she told him everything. She showed him the small fist-shaped bruises on her ribs that were still purple from the day before, and told him of William's threat to kill her and the school's unwillingness to do anything about it. She told him about her teacher's car and how it was that she was going to be blamed unjustly again. She didn't even notice the tears falling from her dead eyes with the thousand-yard-stare.

In the end, she was just sent home with her father. She was suspended from school when they found out she'd had the gun on campus, which made her miss her final tests, fail her classes, and thus fail the eighth grade. She took it in stride and was cold and heartless about the entire ordeal.

When her mother bought a house twenty miles north of town and was facing the possibility of going back to the same Middle School that failed her once already, she *still* didn't care. She did manage to convince her parents to let her go to a completely different Middle School than the two she'd already attended. This one was five miles from her father's apartment, but only just over two miles from his work at the National Guard. She would be granted a variance by the district, why she never learned, but only if she would go directly to his work and wait there until he was done. Then he would drive Rae home to her mother's house. She would *never* be left alone.

The new Rae was fine with it. Her girlish feelings and insecurities were gone. In fact gone were *all* her feelings, and with them the innocence of childhood. All that remained was a hardened shell that felt nothing at all. After three years, Rae had *finally* achieved what she'd set out to do, and what her parents had wanted of her since she was three. She wasn't a *girl* anymore.

She was *nothing*.

Book III: Growing Up the Hard Way

Chapter 15 - A Hollow Existence

Rae was easily passing her eighth grade classes. At fifteen, she also was regularly beating the Middle School's track and field records. She broke the record for running the mile with a time of four minutes fifty-two seconds her second week there, and ran the two miles from the school to her father Gerald's work in just under fifteen minutes each day, even wearing a twenty-five pound backpack. When she started the year, she was told that if she passed all her classes, she could be promoted to the ninth grade by the start of the second semester. While it would be hard work to make up the lost half year in High School, she was dedicated, and this time didn't have any pesky feelings to distract her.

The route to her father's work could be run one of two ways; one led down a major avenue in town, while the other used less traveled side streets. Both ways were the same distance, so it didn't matter to her which one she used. She left the decision up to random chance. If, when she reached the main avenue, the light was *with* her, she would take the less used streets. If the light was *against* her, she would turn down the avenue and take *that* route.

While she ran, she would listen to tapes of music artists she liked on her Walkman, mostly older groups whose fame had peaked in the sixties or seventies. Her favorites at the time were her Carpenters tapes or her Beach Boys tapes. The highly emotional music seemed to actually make it *easier* to bury her own feelings down inside her, a contradiction that made no sense to her, but one she appreciated nonetheless.

Feelings just led to *hurt* feelings. Happiness just led to knowing what you were missing when you were, more often than not, miserable. Love just led to loss. Laughing just led to ridicule. Friends just led to abandonment. Family just led to judgement. Worst of all, femininity just led to the gates of Hell.

All in all, Rae thought she was better off without the emotions that had brought her nothing but problems and wasted effort throughout her young life. Anything she could do to suppress them or ignore them she felt was a good thing. She would just exist, do as she was expected to do by her family and school, and everything would be fine.

Then it all came crashing down.

On the last day of the second week of the school year, she was running to her father's work as usual and listening to her Beach Boys tape. Most of the time the light was against her, but this time the timing was just right and it was *with* her, so she ran across the avenue and started her run down the side streets lined with businesses. Less than four hundred feet after the intersection was a city bus stop. As she approached, she realized she should have taken the normal route.

Frank Jackson stood with his new High School buddy Gabe at the bus stop. Between them they had just enough money for the fare, but nothing to spend when they got to their destination; the mall. Seeing Rae running toward him must have seemed like a golden opportunity. William had made him look like a *fool*, but Rae had made him look like a *coward*. Blocking the sidewalk with Gabe's assistance, it wasn't difficult to make Rae stop.

"Well, well, *well!* If it isn't *Ray!*" he snidely remarked. Grabbing her by the arm, he gripped her tightly. "*Say*, old buddy... got any change for the bus? We'll take anything you *got!*"

Rae was coldly calculating escape routes as she examined her options. The stop was fairly close to the busy avenue, but the location itself was not that busy as this side of the street only had a vacant lot on it. She'd already gauged that no matter *what* she did, Frank intended to exact revenge on her. Trying to step back, she raised her chin defiantly. "Sorry. I don't have anything to spare. I need all my money for lunches."

"Oh! You *misunderstood* me!" Frank gloated as he tightly restrained her arm. "When I said we'd take anything you *got*, what I *meant* was that we're *going to take* anything you've got! *Gabe?*"

As Frank held her arm, Gabe tried to stuff his hand down her back pocket. "I feel *something* down here! Don't know if it's money or *what!*"

Suddenly, months of pent-up emotions came flooding back as the assault instinctually made Rae feel like they were going to rape her; one man restraining her while the other forced his hand into her pants. She tried to scream, but her changing voice made it come out as a cracked, "*No!*" Yanking her arm free, she ran the only direction she *could...* into the street.

At first she was just running away from her assailants, then she started running *toward* the only other people that she could see; those across the street. Realizing suddenly that she was in a traffic lane and had no idea what traffic was coming at her, she reversed herself and started back toward the safety of the sidewalk. Unfortunately, it was too late.

The car struck her first in the upper right leg, snapping the thick bone in an instant. She'd nearly gotten out of the car's path, so she was hit by its front passenger side and was nearly thrown clear, but her weight was completely on her now broken right leg when the car hit. She was going down right where she was... directly in front of the passenger-side tires.

The world slowed to a crawl as Rae spun in place and began to collapse on the cracked femur. Seeing that she was falling toward and under the car, she tried to reach out with her hands to push herself away. Moving as though through molasses, her arms reacted slowly, but eventually she managed to grab the wheel-well to try and twist herself away. Unfortunately, once she had her grip, she couldn't easily let go.

The car continued its path down the road, the driver only just then registering that a child had run in front of his car and reached for the brake. Even as

his foot pushed the pedal down, the tire rolled over Rae's left foot and the wheel that was crushing her ankle locked up tight as a drum. Her tissue now acting as a lubricant, the car slid fifty-four feet on top of her leg before the driver realized he wasn't slowing down and his wheels were locked. Releasing the brake to pulse the car to a stop, the tire was finally free to turn again and roll over and off of Rae's destroyed ankle.

Pulling herself free as the car finally got off of her and crab-walking on her arms backwards away from the car, Rae was still fully aware of everything happening to her. Once free of the vehicle and seeing it slowly roll past her to a stop, time started moving faster and faster until it had resumed normal speed again. Looking around, she saw Frank and Gabe retreating down the street toward the avenue. Some bystanders rushed toward her, but turned away at the grisly sight that confronted them. Finally, she turned and saw the driver of the car who'd stopped and gotten out. His face looked pale and ashen at what his vehicle had done to her.

Rae then looked down at her leg to see the damage for herself. She must have screamed, because later eyewitness accounts *said* she did, but she didn't hear it or remember doing it. As for the sight itself, her mind blocked the image out in self-protection, and it would take years for Rae to remember what it had looked like. It was difficult to tell where her shoes, socks, and pants ended and the flesh of her leg and remains of her ankle began. Blood covered everything and blended into a red fibrous mass of cotton, skin, polyester, muscle, rubber, tendon, plastic, and bone.

After the initial trauma, and with her mind making her not look again, Rae tried to relax. She knew she was going into shock. Looking at a bystander, she managed to croak out, "Blanket... Jacket?" Lying back as her strength faded, she lay on the asphalt and waited for death as the strange man just backed away. Her worst fear at that moment wasn't that she was going to die, but that she was going to die and be buried in a suit and tie as Raymond Michael Evans. Of all the things for her to be scared of just then, that dying as a boy topped the list was telling.

Forcing herself to stay awake and fight the cloud of pain threatening to push her into sweet oblivion, she sat back up and forced herself to breathe slowly in through her nose and out through her mouth. A few moments later, another bystander arrived who was not as squeamish.

"You're going to be alright." the woman said calmly. "An ambulance is on its way. Good! Keep breathing like that! In... out!"

"I... I'm g-going into sh-shock." Rae chattered through wracking shivers. "Coat? Blanket? Anything!"

Seeing the young teen so aware of their condition caught the woman by surprise. "Oh God, *wow!* That's just... um... hang on a second, *OK?*"

Rae forced herself to keep breathing, imagining a warm fire bathing her skin in heat. It helped, but not much as the thought brought to mind a time years earlier when she was camping with her family in the woods and Marie, angry with her over some silly argument, carelessly sloshed boiling hot soup on her belly, causing a second-degree burn. She also kept being distracted by the sound of a teenage girl crying near her. The girl was too distant to make out what she was saying through her sobs, but one phrase penetrated the noise and agony... the one sound that all people can recognize through even the most distracting situation.

"...Ray Evans..."

The girl had said her name... she somehow knew who Rae was.

Eventually, the woman returned with a lady's coat and draped it over Rae's upper body. "Now lie back, relax, breathe, and stay conscious. Try not to move your head, OK? You might have neck injuries."

When the ambulance finally arrived, having seemed to take hours to get there when in fact it had only been minutes, Rae was beginning to get

feeling back in her limbs. Silent tears trickled down the side of her head and into her ears as she pushed harder and harder to ignore the growing agony. Trying to breathe through it wasn't working anymore, and she desperately wanted something to stop the pain.

As the EMT leaned over her, he smiled at Rae reassuringly. "*Hi!* I'm John. We're gonna get you to the hospital right *away*, OK? Just lie *still* and try not to move. Let *us* do all the work."

Her teeth still chattering, Rae nodded. "M-my n-name... is... R-Rae... Rae... Ev-Evans." she stammered. Giving her age, she then gave them her father's name and work number. Working to get her on a backboard, Rae almost screamed in agony as they slid it under her hips.

"Now don't be like that!" John chided her. "We aren't even *touching* your leg and we made sure *not* to."

"Not... my... left... leg." Rae explained slowly. "My right... near the hip. I think... my femur... is broken."

John shook his head. "No kid... you're in *shock*. It's not your upper *right* leg... it's your lower *left* leg."

Frustrated that he wasn't listening, she tried to sit up. "You mean... my tibia and fibula? *Yeah*... I know... they're fractured... *John*. But..."

Seeing her try to move, the two EMTs almost sat on her. "*Look* Kid, you need to hold *still!*"

"My *name* is *Rae*... not *Kid!*" she almost spat at him, barely stopping herself from saying her name was Rachel.

Seeing her react so severely, John nodded. "Alright... *Ray*. We'll be careful of *both* your legs, alright? Now lie *still!* You need to man this *out!*"

Calming down, and trying her best to ignore the pain and John's unintended insult, she told the EMTs and the police officer who'd arrived everything that happened and how to contact her parents. She even managed to dig up the name and phone number of the girl Marie was probably hanging out with.

The EMTs working to get her ready to move, the officer told her that several eyewitnesses, including a friend of her sister's who Rae had heard earlier say her name, had thought they saw Frank and Gabe *push* her into traffic. It could have been easy for her to feign confusion and lie, knowing the two boys could possibly be charged with attempted murder. *They deserve to be thrown in jail!* Rae considered. *They tried to rob me... maybe worse! Go on! Just kinda act foggy-brained and say "I'm not sure... maybe they did."*

In the end, Rae couldn't put her tormentors into the same position she'd often found herself in so many times; accused and punished for something they didn't do. She stuck to her story and only accused the boys of what they had actually *done*, trying to rob her.

Moved to the gurney, she bore down hard to push the pain away. She filled her head with as many happy moments as possible. Dancing with Harmony, holding Marcy's hand, the Haunted Mansion with Trish, playing dress-up with Marie... At that moment, she didn't *care* that it was supposedly sinful; it was what she needed to get through the excruciating ordeal.

As the ambulance started to move, Rae was once more overcome with unbearable pain near her right hip. "God, please just *kill* me!"

"What's *wrong*, Ray?" John asked while they rode toward the hospital. "Does your *head* or *neck* hurt?"

Rolling her eyes that it was the third time he'd asked about head or neck injuries, Rae wanted to throttle him. "No, *John*... I keep telling you... I never hit my head or anything else above the waist. *It's. My. Right. Leg!* It hurts so bad I can't feel anything *else!*"

Shaking his head, John blew out a breath. "Boy, when you get a *bone* you won't let it *go*! Your *head's* messed up! I've seen a *lot* of accidents, Kid... *Ray*! No *way* you didn't hit your head at some point in an accident like that... and I think I'd know a busted *femur* if I *saw* one."

"Just *humor* me and *check* it!" she growled through gritted teeth.

Sighing, he rolled his eyes and pushed on her right upper leg slightly and saw it move freely from side to side from the end near her hip. Turning pale, he looked down at her gritting her teeth through the ordeal. "Holy *shit*, Kid! I think your femoral *head* is severed! You should be *screaming*!"

"I *want* to!" Rae gritted as she let out a breath. "But it won't *help*. A pain killer would make it *easier*, but you kept telling me *no* because of a nonexistent *head* injury!"

"*Sorry*." John said shaking his head. "You'll have to wait until we get you to the hospital."

Rae endured the pain for the rest of the trip. Then, as she was moved into the Emergency room, the nurses and doctors were so concerned about her mangled foot, they *too* ignored the EMT report and Rae's protestations about her femur. She was right back where she'd started. With no one listening to her complaints about her right leg, at one point a nurse telling her to 'man-up' and stop *whining*, finally her father Gerald arrived. Looking down on Rae, he was stunned with her first words to him.

"*Sorry*, daddy." Rae muttered through restrained tears. "I know this is gonna cost a lot of *money*!"

While Rae explained what happened, and how everyone was ignoring the more severe pain she was feeling from her broken right leg, Gerald tried to force the issue with the hospital staff, only to be told that if he didn't stop interfering he'd be forced to leave. When Laura arrived at last, she had to go

through the whole story again, and Rae *still* hadn't gotten anything to reduce the growing torment of her pain, nor would any of the emergency room staff listen when she complained about the torturous pain in her right leg.

Finally, she was taken to X-Ray where she *insisted* that pictures be taken of her upper right leg. The technician had orders to x-ray only her *left* leg, spine, neck, and head. Pushed too far, she refused to submit to the x-ray until she talked to the doctor. When he walked in, Rae forced herself to be calm.

"Dr. Jacobs? I *know* what happened to me. I *never* lost consciousness. I remember *everything*. The car hit my right leg *first*. It fractured the right femur on impact. *Listen* to me! Do I sound *hysterical* or unreasonable? But unless somebody starts *listening* to me, I'm going to start screaming my *head* off until you *make* my father take me out of this place, so he can take me somewhere they *will* listen!"

Doctor Robert Jacobs was taken aback. He'd seen many difficult patients refuse x-rays in his day as an orthopedic surgeon, but never anyone like her. She was calm, articulate, knowledgeable... and only fifteen. "*Alright*. Just *calm* down. I'll have them x-ray your *right* leg, *OK?*"

Rae sighed. "*Thank* you! Just *please* hurry! I don't know how much longer I can put up with the *pain!*"

In the end, she got nothing for the pain until she was prepped for surgery more than two hours after being brought in. The x-rays had verified that she had a separated femoral head in the right leg and a compound fracture of both tibia and fibula of the left. She was taken to surgery to set the bones and a pin was inserted into her left tibia to allow the bone to heal, but a second surgery would be needed later to repair the tissue damage.

The weeks spent alone in the hospital gave Rae time to think. Her bottled-up feelings that had exploded free on the day of the accident had faded back into the hole of her empty heart. She thought a lot about her fear that

she would die on that street as 'Raymond', but with her feelings bottled back up, she struggled to even understand why she would *care*.

I have much more pressing concerns. she mused. *The skin graft they used from my upper left thigh to replace the destroyed tissue on my ankle might not take. I'll never run track again. I don't even have an ankle bone there anymore. My long bones might not finish growing right. I'm going to miss at least three months of school, making getting into the ninth grade by the spring almost impossible. The police aren't even going to charge Frank or Gabe for the attempted mugging or even assault, and I may never even walk normally again. Why should that have been my main worry?*

She wrestled with the question all through her hospital stay. Her emotions completely cut off once more, she couldn't figure out why it mattered.

Meanwhile, her parents swapped homes; her father taking over payments of the house far north of town, while her mother Laura moved into her father's apartment and took over the cheaper rent payments. She also learned that once released she would be convalescing with her father out north of town instead of living with her mother. While her mother was allowing her to keep some girl clothes, she knew her father would never permit it. She couldn't even see why it should matter, though.

Nothing mattered anymore.

Rae just focused on learning how to take care of herself while her father would be gone away at work all day. By the time she was released from the hospital, she'd learned to use her wheelchair expertly, and could easily get by on her own. She cleaned her own dressings, bathed herself, did her own physical therapy, and caught up on almost all of the schoolwork she missed. When in-home teacher visits were arranged, she awed the woman with how quickly and easily she completed her assignments. This went on for months as she healed physically. Her emotional healing not yet even begun, Rae believed that it should just *stay* that way.

It was December when she was finally able to get around on crutches and put weight on her right leg again, a metal plate having been installed to support its re-growth. She went back to school with only two weeks until the Christmas Break, and even attended the Christmas Dance at her school, simply because she thought it was what was expected of her.

Sitting with her crutches leaned against her chair, a girl approached her.

"Hi!" she said with just a hint too much happiness in her voice. "I'm Angela. You're *Ray*, right?"

Looking at the girl wearing the green satin formal, Rae nodded and blinked. "*Raymond*, actually. Nice to meet you Angela."

Standing there looking unsure what to say, Angela sighed. "I guess this must be pretty *boring* for you, not even able to *dance* at all."

Rae considered the question a moment before answering. "I wouldn't say it's *boring*. The *music* isn't bad. Besides, I think I *could* dance, at least a little. Probably only to a *slow* song though, so not likely for me to get the opportunity. Still... *yeah*. I could maybe dance *once* without my crutches. I'd have to be *careful* though." Seeing the girl's face light up slightly, Rae wondered why she was even talking to her.

"You *think* so?" Angela asked with a smile. Seeing Rae just nod and give her a suspicious look, Angela fidgeted with her fingers and looked at some of her friends dancing with their boyfriends. Turning back to Rae, she looked down at her. "Would you mind if I sat with you a while?"

Looking around and not seeing another chair for her to use, Rae scooted over until her right thigh was hanging off the side of the chair, leaving room on the left side. "I don't see any other chairs, so if you like you can share this one with me. I'd stand and give it to you, but I need to be able to

rest my right leg. Since I can't put much of any weight on my left leg, my right gets tired easy."

Happily sitting down close to Rae, Angela pushed in tightly next to the older girl dressed in slacks, a white button-up shirt, black necktie, and polished black leather shoes. "*Thanks, Ray!*" she said gaily even as Rae winced in pain. "Something *wrong?*"

Shaking off the pain of Angela pressing on the sensitive skin where the doctors had taken her skin graft, she pushed the feeling away and her face resumed its normal blank mask. "It's *fine*. Just a mild discomfort."

"*Sorry!*" Angela demurred. Sitting next to Rae and watching the others dance, she sighed and hoped Rae might take the opportunity to talk.

Believing that the girl just pitied her, Rae tried to go along with it and decided to try and make polite conversation. "Are you having a good time?"

"*I suppose.*" Angela shrugged. "All my friends have *boyfriends* already, so it's kind of a bummer when a song comes on that the boys like to dance to... like *this* one. Then I don't have my friends to dance with anymore." When Rae just shrugged, she could see that the girl wasn't taking the hint, so Angela decided to go for broke and just ask. "*Ray? Would you mind dancing with me on the next slow song? I... I'd really like to.*"

Looking over at her, mildly irritated that she had continued to call her Ray when she'd told Angela to use Raymond, she considered the possibility that the girl might like her. Finding that extremely unlikely, *nobody* liked her, and knowing a dance would be harmless, Rae nodded. "*Alright*. Just don't expect *much* from me. Like I *said*, I'll have to be *really* careful not to step too hard on my left leg. *OK?*"

Almost giggling with excitement, Angela put her arm through Rae's. "*OK!*"

The next song was *Crazy for You*, slow enough that Rae felt she could manage. Before she could even say anything, Angela was on her feet.

"Is *this* one OK?" she asked as she helped Rae to stand. Seeing Rae nod and helping her to step a little way from the chair, Angela wrapped her arms around Rae's neck as Rae put her hands on Angela's waist. With almost a foot difference in height, she looked up at Rae and smiled as they began to sway slowly to the music. "Thanks... *Ray*."

Careful never to put all her weight on her left foot, Rae spent the entire dance focused on making it as pleasant as possible for Angela. When at last it ended, Rae could feel a damp sensation in her left shoe. Letting Angela help her back to the chair, Rae dropped into it heavily and sucked teeth at the pain in her ankle. "I... I think my ankle is *bleeding* again." she noted.

Concerned, Angela crouched down next to her, the skirt of her green dress poofing out slightly. "*Really?* I... I didn't know it was that *bad*."

"I don't really have an ankle bone anymore." Rae admitted. "And the skin was... well... they had to do a *lot* to fix it." she finished, trying to avoid being gruesome. "I'll be *fine*. It'll *stop* soon, but I better stay off it the rest of the dance. *Sorry*."

"*That's* OK, Ray!" Angela beamed. "I just can't believe you danced with me on a foot that was so badly *hurt*! That was *really* sweet!" Thinking a moment, she bit her lower lip and stood back up. Then, rummaging around in her little matching green sequined purse, she retrieved a piece of paper and a pen. Jotting down her phone number while looking to see if any of her friends were watching, she quickly handed it to Rae. "Here. *Call* me?"

Rae simply shrugged, took it, and watched her depart to join her friends. She called the girl a few times to converse over the Christmas break, but it turned out that they really had little to nothing in common, Angela being almost three years her junior.

She was also completely disinterested in talking about science, and had no idea who Bing Crosby, Bob Hope, Karen Carpenter, or any of Rae's favorite actors or entertainers even *were*. That on top of Rae's complete emotional detachment, caused Angela's interest to fade quickly and before Rae returned from the break the two weren't talking to one another anymore.

All the while, Rae felt *nothing*. Not happy, sad, joyous, angry, grateful, hurt, or jealous... just a big vacant hole where her heart used to be.

All the while, somewhere inside her, Rachel cried.

Chapter 16 - Moving On

When Rae returned from Christmas Break, a brand new walkman given to her to replace the one that had shattered all over the street, she finished out her classes easily with straight 'A's and was finally passed on to the ninth grade. While Gerald had given her several Beach Boys tapes she enjoyed, Marie gave her a tape of Rick Astley to try and get her to listen to more popular music. While she liked the new songs, she found they caused her to feel too much, so she went back to her old tapes.

Moving to the same school where her sister was now a Senior, Rae went through the motions and did what she was expected to do. She worked hard to finish most of two semesters of coursework in only one and still maintain a C average, all while still going through more physical therapy and practicing her viola daily for the Spring Concert.

She still felt nothing.

Opting to forego PE, she chose instead to enter ROTC. On her first day, she met a boy she recognized. After class ended and they were leaving the ROTC building close to one another, she tapped him on the shoulder.

"Abe, right?" Rae asked. "I think I remember you from Boy Scouts. Are you the same guy whose dad works at the Guard with *my* dad?"

"Oh!" the boy almost shouted. "I remember you! Um... *Raymond*, right? *Yeah!* Long *time!* You just *move* here?"

Not wanting to advertise her having flunked and needing to repeat half the eighth grade, she nodded. "*Something* like that, yeah." She justified the answer as being true as she *had* just moved, from *one* school to *another*. "I had PE last semester, but switched to R.O. when I moved *here*."

Abe nodded as they made their way to the courtyard. "Hey, good to *see* you again! Doing anything at lunch? We have this group of guys that get together and play RPGs in the library! You should *join* us! We need more *players*!"

Not even sure what it was Abe was talking about, she shrugged and nodded as she moved away toward her next class. "OK. Maybe. *See* you!"

When lunch came, she made her way to the school library and found Abe sitting with three other boys.

"*Ray!* Come on!" Abe said in a hushed tone. Moving to sit at the table with the boys, Abe ran the introductions. "*Ray?* This is Peter, Jeffry, and Randy. *Guys?* Ray and I were in Scouts. He's a pretty smart guy from what I get!"

Peter extended his much larger hand and shook Rae's firmly, making the girl almost wince. "*Hi.* You in R.O. too?" he asked, noting the handout that Rae hadn't put in her locker yet.

"Yeah." she answered simply. "*Way* better than PE!" Forcing a laugh as she knew it was socially expected, she was glad when the other four chuckled a little. "So what's *this* all about?"

"Role playing." Abe answered as though that explained everything. "We're doing *Robotech* and we could really use a fourth."

Cocking an eyebrow, Rae searched her memory until she remembered a game a neighbor boy played back in Carson City. "Is that like Dungeons and Dragons?" She'd watched once and it looked interesting, but seemed way too violent for Rae. Lots of hacking and swords and blood and demons and other stuff boys love that Rae couldn't stand.

"*Kinda.*" Peter explained. "But instead of swords and magic it's Mecha and Protoculture. Just like the *cartoon.*"

"*Cartoon?*" Rae puzzled. "Sorry... don't *know* it."

"No way! It's *completely awesome!* You gotta see it!" Abe almost yelled.

Trying to mimic their exuberance, Rae copied Abe's attitude. "*Alright!* Sounds *cool!* I'll *look* for it!"

"In the *mean* time," Jeffrey observed, "We really need a good tank pilot. *Interested?*"

Knowing she was going to have to learn to get along in a boy's world, and someday a man's world, she nodded. "Why *not?* Might be *fun!*"

The rest of lunch was spent with Rae just watching them play and getting the hang of just what it is they were doing. From what Rae could tell, it was a giant game of make-believe with set rules and one player who didn't play, but just ran the game and acted like a storyteller; describing what the make-believe characters saw, heard, and experienced. Kind of like an improvisational version of her old 'Choose Your Own Adventure' books. After a few days of this she was invited to make her own character and Rae played her first role-playing game of many.

Soon she was hanging out with Peter and Abe during all the time she had available, soaking up 'how to be a boy' from them like a sponge. Being the first boys that ever really seemed to enjoy her company without it being forced by parents or teachers, she soon learned the basics of what she'd need to know to survive most male social situations. She learned more in those gaming sessions than in all the years she spent observing boys put together. It also let her practice what she'd learned with her character first, until she got the act down pat. When she'd slip up and do something out of character for a guy, she could just excuse it as "Well, that's what my character would do. He's kind of a wuss outside his tank. I thought it might make him interesting to play that way."

Outside these social times, Rae rarely laughed, complained, smiled, or showed much of any emotion. She only did these things when they were socially expected and kept her true feelings locked so far away that she didn't really feel them much. Meanwhile, deep inside her, Rachel endured the darkest and most despairing loneliness imaginable; surrounded by family who supposedly *loved* her, and people she called friends who theoretically *liked* her, no one even knew she *existed*.

Time passed and life went on this way. Most of her life she'd been an angry, frustrated, hurt, and lonely girl, and tried to let everyone around her know it, but it never did any good. So she just cut it all off and endured it alone. No one knew how humiliating it was when she'd been given a man's razor for Christmas and had to start shaving. No one knew how envious she was of the girls around her and how they got to be themselves, while she was trapped in a dark cage and called 'young man'. No one could reach her and she almost *liked* it that way. She was safe. No one can hurt you if they don't even know you're there.

One Saturday, near the end of the school year, her father had Guard Drill and would be gone all day and Marie was supposed to come by and take her to their mother's for the weekend. Marie never showed up. After it turned noon and her sister was now four hours late, Rae decided to just *walk* there herself. Taking the most direct route over the low mountain ridge that started sloping up right outside her father's back porch, she climbed the 750 feet up as it reached the crest and then 1,500 feet down the other side. The not quite twenty-four mile journey took her just over eight hours to walk.

Reaching the steps going up to her mother's apartment, Rae was severely limping, and her ankle had been bleeding for the last several miles. Arriving at the door and knocking after making the difficult climb of the stairs, it was immediately answered by her mother.

"*Ray!*" Laura shouted as she almost crushed the girl in a hug. "Where have you *been?* Your sister is out *looking* for you!"

Nonplussed, Rae shrugged. "She was *supposed* to pick me up at eight this morning and bring me over here. When she *still* wasn't there at noon, I got tired of waiting for her. Since I had no money for the bus, I *walked*." Limping into her apartment, Laura led her to the couch.

"*Ray!* Sorry... Raymond!" she scolded her. "That was *very* dangerous! You should have just *waited*."

"How long was I *supposed* to wait in an empty house, Mom?" Rae asked flatly. "I know you know how *lonely* it can get out there with nobody around. How long has Marie been looking for me?"

Taken aback by the cold logic of Rae's point, she couldn't see why Rae would ask, making her stop removing Rae's shoes. "Almost two hours!"

"So, she didn't start looking for me right away? Or is *that* just when she *finally* noticed I wasn't there because she showed up six hours late?" Rae asked rhetorically. "It has to be one or the *other*, right?"

"She was at your cousin Daisy's house." Laura answered, pulling the left shoe off. "She said she was just a little late getting out of there getting things ready for their graduation and..."

"*Aunt* Daisy's house, you mean." Rae corrected her. "She's Uncle Darryl's wife's younger sister... that makes her our Aunt."

"She's the same age as Marie!" Laura shouted. "And stop quibbling over minor details!"

Shrugging, Rae proceeded to make her point. "So, she was just a *little* four hours late when I left the house? I walked out the door just after noon, Mom. It took me this long to get here. It's about twenty-four miles, straight as I can go. Walking three miles an hour, that's eight hours." Glancing at her calculator watch she nodded. "Which it's just a tad after eight now. So..."

I should have just spent six hours sitting there, ready to go, *alone*? Doing *nothing*?"

"Yes! *No!*" Laura shouted as she pulled the bloody sock of Rae's foot. "*Ray!* Look what you've done to your *ankle!* It's going to *scar!*"

"It's *already* scarred, Mom. I didn't make it any *worse* than it already *was.*" she stated calmly. "It also gave me a chance to do some things on the way. I visited the street where the accident was." She stopped and emotionlessly reached into her pocket, pulling out a piece of gray plastic with one side looking like it'd been ground down with a belt sander. "I found *this* there. It... it's a part of my old shoes. The loop for the Velcro strap."

Laura looked at the seemingly ordinary piece of garbage with a horrified expression on her face. "Oh, *baby!* If you *needed* to go there, *I* could have taken you!"

"No you *couldn't,* because I was at *Dad's* all morning and not *here* where I was *supposed* to be." she retorted emptily. "I tried calling several times before I left, but there was never any answer, so I figured I should just get *myself* where I was supposed to be and stop there along the way. I'm *fine.*"

"But you might have been hit by a *car,* or..." Laura started to almost cry.

"*Believe* me, Mom. I was *never* in danger of *that.* I made *doubly* sure I was *well* away from traffic and followed all the pedestrian traffic laws. Now I'm *here* and nothing *happened* and I'm *OK.*"

Laura stopped and thought about what Rae was telling her. "So, this was a chance to prove to yourself that the accident didn't, *scar* you? *Emotionally,* I mean? That you could walk that far if you *had* to and not be afraid of getting *hit?* Is *that* it?"

"Mostly I did it because I just felt I *should*." she answered with dead eyes. "You always wanted me to be more brave and rugged. Now I *am*."

Looking at her youngest daughter, Laura simply shook her head. "I... I guess it's a *man* thing then... something you just *needed* to do." Standing up after giving her another quick hug, her mother sighed and just accepted that Rae was OK. "Well, I'll call your father so he doesn't worry. He can tell Marie when he sees her. She should be up to his place any time now. She's driving the road between here and there looking for you."

When Marie graduated several days later, Rae was polite and respectful of the accomplishment, but nothing more. She'd come to loath having to ride into school with her sister who, when she wasn't ignoring her, was trying to give her men's fashion tips to be more 'in style', pushing her to listen to more popular music, and generally be like the popular boys her age. Hiding those feelings were the hardest that last week when Marie spent each day chewing Rae out for making her look bad for forgetting about Rae and leaving her abandoned and alone for most of a day.

While Marie had been nagging Rae to dress more stylish, Rae scoffed at her suggestions. Not even bothering with her girl clothes after the accident as they only highlighted how ugly and scarred she'd become, she really didn't *care* how she looked anymore. Clothes were for keeping warm and hiding her secretly hated male body and nothing more. The only time she cared how she looked was when she was in her ROTC uniform, and then she was *spotless*. She started wearing her uniform all day whenever she was required to dress out for inspection so she didn't have to change clothes in front of boys anymore, taking great care to ensure she could keep the privilege.

She won Best Freshman Drill her first year and made up three classes that she missed the first semester; Geometry, English, and Biology. It was enough that she would be able to graduate with the rest of her class only a year behind where she should have been.

She also watched the other girls in her school socialize with each other and longed to join in, but she was forbidden, so the feelings were buried along with all the others. The only socializing she was permitted was with the disgusting boys whose idea of socializing was burping, farting, hitting each other, making fun of each other, talking about girls as though they were pieces of meat, and pretending to blow things up. So that's what she did, loathing it the entire time and pushing those feelings down with the rest.

When she turned sweet sixteen, she was yet again treated like a second-class sibling by her own family. While Marie had been given a car, one that her sister had already driven into the ground through lack of care and maintenance less than two years later. Rae was given slippers, some comic books, a few gag gifts, and a monitor for her now outdated computer that she'd seen listed on sale for over half off. In order for *Rae* to get a car, she would have to *buy* her father's old Ford that was literally as old as she was and didn't run; she'd have to fix it herself. So she *did*.

It would take her a year to save the money up by skipping lunch, since lunch money was the only allowance she was permitted and she wasn't allowed to get a job because her grades weren't good enough; even though they *were* passing. In the mean time, for her Sophomore year, she was going to and from school on her twelve-speed bike. At the start of the year her father had moved again, this time into a doublewide trailer back near where Rae's mother lived. It was five miles each way to her school, but Rae rode it rain or shine. Of course, she had no real choice.

Her running had been ruined by the accident, having crushed over an inch of her left leg bones into powder and making her hips twist unnaturally when she tried to run, causing considerable pain in her back. The endurance she'd built up through her running though meant she could bike almost *indefinitely*. Unfortunately, she figured that by the time she had enough saved to buy the car and the parts needed to fix it, and after nearly a hundred hours of knuckle-busting work she knew the vehicle needed and wasn't looking forward to, she would probably be seventeen. Rae didn't

even bother to get her driver's license until she was only weeks from her next birthday.

It came as a surprise to Rae when her mother Laura got married again, this time to a man named George Richard who everyone, including her mother, seemed to call 'Mick' for some reason. Rae was by now very gun-shy of the men in her mother's life, but Mick seemed to be different. He was a happy man, who seemed to like it when everyone around him was happy too. So, while cautious and guarded against him, Rae held out some optimistic hope that he would be different, if not for *her* sake, then at least for her *mother* who *deserved* a break in that department.

Rae also joined the ROTC Rifle Drill team her Sophomore year. It was the closest thing she would ever be able to get to what she really wanted to do and never could; cheerleading. It looked like fun and the uniforms were adorable, but she was now growing into a very obvious man and had a detestable male body. Her bones had healed, but her scars weren't minimal and her body had twisted into a mockery of who she was inside. Any hopes she'd had that male puberty would erase her longing to be a girl were dashed. All it did was make her hate herself more. Like all the rest of her feelings, these she just shoved down inside and buried, never letting anyone even know they were there and ignoring them.

Her Junior year in the fall of 1990 began as usual. Trigonometry, ROTC, Orchestra, Physics, US History... but for English she had an opportunity to take an alternate course; *Science Fiction and Fantasy*. This was one of her few indulgences. She'd become a fan of the works of Asimov, Wells, and Clarke... but most especially Robert Heinlein. In his books Rae would be free to examine *her* human condition; the nature of love, masculinity and femininity, what liberty means, and what she'd be willing to do to keep it.

She wrote an essay on his stories and the questions about humanity that they forced to the surface, and her teacher Mrs. Bartles fell in love with her as a student. She could always count on Rae to have something insightful

to add or to bring up a point the other students, mostly other girls, failed to think of. Rae never thought much about why there were only five boys in the class of thirty.

When she did think about it, she found it odd that so many girls would be drawn to this class, especially since regular Junior year English would be mostly Shakespeare and other classic literature. Why the boys her age would find *that* to be preferable to discussing the cultural impact of science fiction and fantasy or the relative merits of Wellsian versus Vernian storytelling was a mystery she would never solve. While she'd learned to fake boy behavior, they still made no *sense* to her.

Meanwhile, Rae's Orchestra teacher, Mrs. Bates, almost *begged* Rae to join the Sierra Community Orchestra. After weeks of asking, Rae finally relented and was shocked to learn that she was the only High School student *there*. The rest of the group was made of college students and adults who'd been playing, some professionally, for *decades*.

Mrs. Bates, who was a member of the orchestra herself, told the rest of the orchestra that Rae was one of the most soulful viola players she'd ever heard and, while Rae felt she was exaggerating, was honored to be included in their concert that winter playing *Handle's Messiah*. It was the one time her entire family turned out to listen to one of her concerts and made Rae almost happy. *Almost*.

ROTC saw her in the Rifle Drill team again, this time as its *head*. Since all of the more experienced cadets from the team had graduated that spring, it left Rae as the one with the best qualifications. Her command voice had been honed the previous year when she'd been assigned as Platoon Sergeant; her exacting movements, near flawlessness in drill, and ability to teach it to others having earned her the position. So for an hour after school, three times a week, people could hear Rae's clear voice across the entire campus booming orders to her team.

Her instructors saw in her the potential to be a good leader; clean-cut, highly intelligent, dedicated, and absolutely *devoid* of the emotional outbursts the boys her age were prone to. Her only major fault in their eyes was that her contemporaries saw her as too rigid and inflexible. Failure to follow proper drill techniques were harshly dealt with; including the expulsion of one member from the team only two weeks into the year.

She'd warned him *repeatedly* that failing to hold the faux-weapon correctly could result in an incorrect throw, but Corporal Reggie Phillips ignored her instructions and continued to do things *his* way, convinced Rae was being needlessly stringent. When his incorrect hold caused the rifle to slip out of his hands as he threw it, it smashed directly into Rae's face, cut her lip, and bloodied her nose. The horrified Corporal ran from the drill area in blind fear that Rae would become violent, but instead Rae emotionlessly got up, retrieved a hand towel from her backpack, pressed it against her bleeding mouth and nose, and proceeded to lecture the rest of the team.

"*This* is why proper drill technique is *important!*" she shouted clearly and dispassionately. "It would do the *rest* of you *well* to learn from Corporal Phillips' *mistake!* What happened to *me* could just as easily have happened to *any* of you! I'm calling for Corporal Phillips to be *expelled* from this unit for gross negligence resulting in an injury! Any *objections?*"

"*Ray?*" Private Huddleson interrupted mildly in his usual soft-spoken voice. "It was a *mistake!* Any *one* of us could have made it! You can't expect us to be *perfect!* You should give him another *chance!* I'm *sure* he's sorry!"

Rae looked at the Private as the rest of the team nodded in agreement, turning and walking away from the squad a moment. Then she suddenly turned about-face and shouted. "Sergeant Williams!"

The round-faced boy one year Rae's junior looked around, almost as if in hope that Rae had meant some *other* Sergeant Williams. "Yes, sir?"

"Sergeant, *who* was your practice buddy *last* Friday?" she inquired, already knowing the answer as she always assigned practice groups.

Fidgeting momentarily, he cleared his throat before answering. "Corporal *Phillips*, sir!"

"And during your practice drills Sergeant, did you and Corporal Phillips engage in practice rifle throws to one another?"

Gulping, the younger boy nodded. "*Y*-yes, sir!"

"*I see.*" Rae stated as she walked up and down in front of her team, holding the cloth to her face that was now red with her blood. "Who here would like to *volunteer* to be Corporal Phillips' partner until the Drill Meet next month, *knowing* that he flagrantly disregarded my *repeated* attempts to correct his error and what the result of that error can be? *Anyone?*"

Stopping and hearing no one willing to take up the offer, she continued. "*No?* I take it from your silence that there are no *further* objections to Corporal Phillips' dismissal? Speak up *now!*" Pausing a moment to see that no one was willing to say anything further in his defense, she nodded. "Good! *Squad!*" she barked at the end and watched them all snap to attention. "*Dismissed!* Drill will resume Friday at the usual time!"

After drill practice, Sergeant Major Reynolds, the senior ROTC instructor, took Rae's report on the incident and agreed with Rae that he should be removed from the team, if for no other reason than no one would willingly partner with him after the incident. Rae's nose and lip had stopped bleeding, but they were still swollen and would be for days. He even complimented Rae on her professionalism and leadership in not losing her temper when she'd been injured before dismissing her. When Rae finally headed towards her newly refurbished car, she almost literally ran into Corporal Phillips on his way in.

Seeing Rae, his eyes bulged out and he began to back-pedal away from her and recoil in fear. "*Dude! I'm sorry! OK? Don't hit me!*"

Standing perfectly still and looking at him dispassionately, Rae spoke in even tones. "I have no *intention* of it, Corporal. I do not engage in acts of violent retribution. You *will* find however, that you are no longer on the Rifle Drill team."

Recovering from his retreat, Reggie suddenly got angry. "You can't *do* that! It was a stupid *mistake!* *Anyone* could have done it!"

"Not *anyone.*" she replied coldly, ignoring his posturing, "*You* did, and it happened because you weren't following *orders.* The decision to expel you was *unanimous.* *No one* on the team wants to pair with you, because they *all* know you're a danger to them because you won't *listen.* You might consider taking this as an opportunity to learn self-discipline and to follow *orders* in your next volunteer group, perhaps Unarmed Drill. At *any* rate, it's no longer my concern. Good *day,* Corporal." At that she simply walked past him and out the doors.

So it went for most of her classes. She got on well with most of her teachers and got passable grades. She could have done *better,* but she didn't consider getting a high GPA a priority. Keeping her emotions cut off and not being too heavily scrutinized were more important goals.

In total contrast to her other classes, her US History teacher was a brutal dictator. His idea of teaching was nothing short of socialist anti-American indoctrination and anti-Christian rhetoric. While Rae could have just ignored him, she needed a good grade in the class to graduate, and some things he said challenged Rae's convictions that kept her feminine side under wraps, so she had to defend them.

Anytime Rae voiced a dissenting opinion regarding a lecture demonizing Rae's faith though, or pointed out a flaw in one of his arguments in favor of

total socialism, he would shut her down and fail her on her next test. Nit-picking any excuse he could find, even poor penmanship, he was *determined* to fail her and ruin her future prospects, all because she wouldn't just shut up and believe whatever he *told* her to believe.

Before the end of the first quarter Rae had to drop his class with the intention of retaking it as a Senior with a different teacher. She *had* to or risk not graduating. She resented that a teacher could have *that* much power over the future of their students and use it to browbeat them to accept his beliefs, but there was nothing she could *do* about it.

She tried to just change teachers, but the only way she could *do* it would be to drop ROTC and switch to PE... something Rae was loath to do. Since she was required to take a full course load until her Senior year, she was forced to pick a class from those available in the same period, which didn't leave many choices. The one she would pick, seemingly at random, would again send her life in a new direction.

She joined Advanced Choir.

Chapter 17 - A New Perspective

Rae had *always* had a good singing voice. When she was in third grade in Carson City, she took choir as an extra-curricular class, and was one of the best Altos in the school. She could harmonize on instinct, had near-perfect pitch, and could sight-read Treble, Alto, *and* Bass clef music. She'd also taught herself to play piano when Marie was given lessons. Rae had even composed music on her computer, something unusual for the time and the limitations of the technology. To join the Advanced Choir however, you had to *audition*. When Mr. Hartford heard her and she described her list of qualifications though, he was so happy to welcome her to the class he made her his de-facto teacher's aid immediately.

It also opened up Rae's circle of acquaintances. Throughout High School so far, she'd managed to avoid attention or interacting with anyone outside ROTC and Orchestra, but now she had to work with a new circle of people; some the most popular kids in school. Trying to keep a low profile while acting as the teacher's aid, especially having come into the class late in the semester, was impossible. Rae was getting noticed by important people.

She hated the attention. Even when she'd become head of the Rifle Drill team at the start of the year, she kept herself mixed in with the group and directed other member of the squad to take the more up-front and visible drill displays. Getting attention meant getting scrutinized, and Rae wasn't keen on anyone looking too closely at her faux-male behavior, lest they spot the flaws and see how girly she really was.

When Mr. Hartford made her his TA, it put her on display. She did her best to hide, but within weeks, three of the girls in the choir, Kate, Lisa, and Melanie, had latched onto her as their joking 'fourth'. Teasing her incessantly that she was 'just one of the girls', thinking that any guy could take the joke, to Rae it was more than just teasing. It was a *threat*. It was wearing down her callous exterior as they tried to include her, each day making it more difficult to keep up her charade, not give in, and honestly *join* them.

While all this had been going on, her father Gerald had been brought up to Active Duty as his unit deployed to the Gulf to help turn back the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq. Thus it was that Rae found herself living in her father's house with only Marie and her then boyfriend Leonardo Martinez. Marie continued to ignore Rae, giving her a free hand to do as she pleased.

With Rae facing her resurgent femininity and the prospect of her father not returning from a war zone, she got in her car one Friday night and started driving. At first she didn't know where she was going, but soon she found herself driving all the way to San Francisco to look at the ocean and think. She spent hours there, sitting and watching the waves break over and over. She considered her life, how hard it was getting to keep denying her nature, and the nature of sin.

Could it really be sinful to just be the way God made me to be? she wondered as she watched the Moon set into the ocean, lighting up the crashing waves. *God's not supposed to test people beyond their ability, but I'm finding it impossible to actually change who I am. No matter how I act, I'm always Rachel inside. It's Rachel who does the thinking and feeling and then I have to put it through my 'boy' filter before speaking or acting to hide myself and push my feelings down so hard I end up feeling nothing, not even love! Christ said even thinking sinful things was a sin, so the very nature of my existence, regardless of how I act, is a sin according to God... one I can't do anything to change!*

She watched the sky get brighter as the ocean slowly disappeared into a layer of fog. She found no real answers that night, but she did find a little moment of peace in the hurricane of her internal turmoil. *If God made me this way, and He doesn't make mistakes, He had a reason for doing it, and I don't think it was to test my faith.* she mused as she walked back to her car. *I think all I can do is try to be honest with myself and hope to salvation. If I'm a living sin, then all I can hope for is forgiveness. I have to believe His purpose for making me this way will be revealed. Otherwise I have nothing to live for and might as well walk down to the water now and drown myself.*

While driving home, the weather turned foul with mixed rain and snow. Approaching Placerville, the car in front of her stopped short for a light turning yellow that they really should have just gone through. Her car, lacking anti-lock brakes and weighing twice as much as the newer model light truck, hydroplaned as she fought for control before spinning out and plowing backwards into a guardrail. The impact tore up her driver's side door and sent a shower of glass all over her as the side window shattered inches from her face. Finding it a minor miracle that not only was she unhurt but that didn't have a scratch on her, she was now in a jam. Over one hundred thirty miles from home, her car door torn open, and unable to pay the tow fee that had gotten her off the road, she called the only person she could... her mother.

Laura was fuming as she and Mick drove from their home out into the weather to rescue Rae. Even as they drove the two hours to where she was stranded, her new husband's even demeanor tempered her ire. By the time they reached Rae, Laura's temper had cooled some and, between the three of them, they managed to limp Rae and her car home. That was the day Rae's relationship with her stepfather changed. He could have blasted her for being irresponsible, for wasting their time and money, or for worrying her mother... but he didn't. He simply smiled, shook his head, and said, "These things happen."

By the time of the Christmas Concert, which she couldn't participate in with the choir as she already had responsibilities as first-chair viola in the orchestra, 'Raymond' had become 'Rae' to Kate, Lisa, and Melanie, and she was beginning to loosen up and just be herself. None of them judged her for being more feminine than she *should* be. It helped that Jason, Melanie's boyfriend, was also part of their group, but Jason was just 'there' and was still 'just a boyfriend', while Rae had become 'one of the girls'. It was then that another member of the choir took notice of Rae.

Julia Whitehall was an excellent singer, but when Mr. Hartford gave her a solo in the Christmas Concert she was petrified. While she had flawless

tone, she needed to learn projection and confidence. He assigned the task of teaching it to her to Rae, who had excellent projection honed by years of ROTC drill and calling cadence as Platoon Sergeant. They worked together during lunch for weeks, until Julia could successfully make her beautiful voice fill an entire room.

Meanwhile the two began to get close. For Julia's part, she saw Rae as a confidant, like a good girlfriend she could talk to about her problems, but with none of the concerns that Rae would use it to tear her down later like some girls did. For Rae's part, she enjoyed the opportunity to connect with another teenage girl on her own level and not be judged for having a woman's insight. Julia was witty, funny, popular, and pretty. Rae was none of those things, but admired them in her. In turn she admired Rae's intellect, ability to not care what other people thought of her, and to understand things girls think and feel that no boy usually could, while still having an insight into how boys act, and in some cases, *why*.

Their closeness ended up catching the attention of her boyfriend. Eric was a typical teenage football player, meaning he only looked to Julia for two things, as a status symbol and for sex. It was what Julia confided in Rae most often about; the problems she had with Eric. While Rae couldn't relate to being in love with a guy, she *could* relate to being a teenage girl in love, and understood boys more than any girl ever *wanted* to. Eric saw only one thing in Rae; a guy spending time with *his* girl and *that* couldn't be allowed.

At first he tried to forbid Julia from hanging out with Rae, but when she refused and threatened to dump him if he tried to force the issue, he changed targets. He tried threatening Rae subtly at first, but she wouldn't take the hint, so he started ridiculing Rae to as many people as he could and tried to blow off their friendship as '*Julia's gay friend Ray*'. Since Rae didn't care what people thought of her though, *that* didn't work *either*.

All the while Rae was becoming quite attached to Julia, moreso than she should. She swore to herself she would never do anything to undermine

Julia's relationship with Eric. She wouldn't become one of 'those' girls; the ones that ruin a friend's relationship for their own desires. It became harder each day when Julia would complain about him to not tear him down. She even forced herself to point out his *good* qualities, painfully few that there were. Rae's convictions were being tested on a nearly daily basis.

While Julia was becoming Rae's closest friend, Rae was also becoming free with her emotions and actions around others. More and more she found herself slipping into her natural speech patterns and mannerisms when talking with Kate, Lisa, or Melanie. Slowly her faux-male friendship with Peter and Abe in ROTC fell by the wayside as it became increasingly uncomfortable for them to be around her. Rae didn't care that much; she'd gotten a taste of being accepted as a true friend. Fake friendships just wouldn't do anymore.

The name-calling got worse and she was increasingly referred to as 'fag', 'queer', 'fairy', and other more unsavory names, but Rae would just laugh at the implication, that she liked guys, and extol the virtues of women over men. Twice she was beaten up and once she was even 'trashed' by guys she didn't even know for 'crossing the line'. It was 'boys against girls' as to who was better, and for a guy to take the girl's side was considered high treason.

Rae had breathed a sigh of relief when her father Gerald returned from Active Duty. The fears she'd had that he'd be killed had turned out to be worry over nothing. The conflict had been so one-sided that the coalition forces had suffered only a handful of casualties, but of course no one, least of all Rae, had known that would be the case when he'd left. By the time he returned home though, Rae was a changed person. She just never let *him* see the changes. To Rae, Gerald was her infallible *hero*, and she wouldn't *let* him be upset about anything; most especially *her*.

When it came time for the Spring Concert, to make up for her lack of participation in the Christmas Concert, Mr. Hartford tasked Rae with composing a bridge to combine two songs. *Climb Every Mountain* and

You'll Never Walk Alone needed to be made into a round to be sung by *The Select Choral*, a group of the six best singers in the choir, of which she was a member. She was also helping him with the choreography for *Cool* from *West Side Story* and taught the dance steps to the two boys who would do the number as a duet.

Rae was having fun and was more herself than in years. Her outer shell of false masculinity had been reduced to a thin veneer that she wore like a raincoat; only when needed. When the night of the concert finally came, she was calm, relaxed, and ready to make her family proud of her hard work. Rae was going over a last minute change to the bridge she'd composed when Mr. Hartford pulled her aside.

"Ray, I *know* you don't like being in the spotlight, and I *hate* to put this on you last minute, but I need a *favor*." he began delicately.

"What *is* it?" Rae asked tentatively as she sat on a nearby stool.

Taking a breath, he blurted it out like ripping off a bandage. "Will you understudy for *Brian*? He's not *here* and *you're* the only other person who knows the *routine*!"

Rae's eyes shot open like saucers. He was asking Rae to be one of only two people on stage dancing and singing *Cool*. The attention she would get would be almost impossible to avoid. The *Cool* number was supposed to be the most visible number of the choir's part of the concert; the only one with choreography. More importantly, her father, sister, and someday-brother-in-law were in the audience. While Rae had become free with herself at school, she was still 'Raymond' at home, and never let her femininity show. It would be almost *impossible* to hide herself while openly singing and dancing on stage.

"I'm *sorry*, Mr. H. You know I'd do almost *anything* for you, but I... I just... I *can't*!" Getting up and running out the back door of the stage in a panic,

Rae slowed once she was outside and wandered over near the dumpsters. Leaning back against the brick wall, she slid down into a crouch and wrapped her arms around her knees. *I just can't go out there in front of Daddy, Marie, and Leonardo and do that number! They'll know! They'll see me!* Cursing her foul luck, she wondered if she could convince them to leave. Hearing the door open and her three friends come looking for her, Rae sighed.

"Rae!" Lisa whined. "Come *on!* You're *great* at this number! I watched you teach Brian and yeah, he could *do* it, but you can *feel* it!"

Melanie nodded in agreement. "*Yeah!* You, like... really get *into* the part! Like you really *are* some sixties *greaser* or something!"

Laughing lightly, Rae shook her head and rolled her eyes. "It was the *fifties*... and they weren't *greasers*... they were *gang* members!"

"*See?*" Kate pointed out. "You *know* all this stuff! Come *on* Rae! You can *do* this! Otherwise we'll have to drop the *number!*"

"We'll be a *laughing* stock, Rae! Remember *Christmas?*" Lisa pleaded. "Rae! *Come on,* girlfriend! Do it for *us!*"

Rae half smiled at the term of endearment that Lisa used, having almost felt like she really was 'one of the girls' for months. The image though of her father and Leonardo in the audience kept her firm. "*Sorry,* guys. Like I told Mr. H... I'd do just about *anything* for you all. You're the best friends I've ever *had*... but... I just *can't* go out there in front of my father and sister like that! He'd take it the wrong way, and my sister *already* thinks I'm gay! *No!*"

Looking at one another, Kate suddenly perked up and looked at Lisa with a smile. Leaning in and whispering in Lisa's ear, the three then made their way back inside. Several minutes passed and Rae could hear the Jazz Ensemble begin their set. She knew the *Cool* number was supposed to be

first, to set the stage for the other showtunes the chorus would be doing, so all she had to do was wait until it was too late. She didn't notice when the door to the stage opened, nor the footsteps approaching her.

"Ray?" Julia asked softly, suddenly seeming to Rae to come from out of nowhere. "Ray, come back *in!* We really *need* you! I *know* you're scared, but if you don't come back in and do the number, we'll be *humiliated!* Just like *Christmas!* We'll be lucky if the school doesn't *cancel* Advanced Choir next year if we mess up *both* concerts! *Please?*"

Rae's heart melted at her plea. Sighing again, she looked up at her. "You know, I would do *anything* to make you happy, Julia... but you don't know what you're *asking!* My *father* is out there! And my *sister!* If I get up on that stage and do that number, don't you know what they'll *think?* *Me?* Dancing and singing on stage? My sister's boyfriend will *never* let me hear the end of it, and my sister Marie will be calling me gay for the next *year!* With *Brian,* no one would think *twice!* He's twice my *size!* But *me?* You *know* it's true!"

Julia took a sharp breath when Rae said she'd do anything for her. Lisa and Kate had told her the same thing inside when they convinced her to try and talk Rae back in, but when she had asked, '*Why me?*' and they had told her '*Because Rae's in love with you!*' she didn't believe them. Now she *knew.*

While she hadn't said it out loud, Julia heard it in the tone of Rae's voice. She didn't know why she hadn't seen it earlier, but suddenly a lot of things about Rae's behavior made *sense* to her now. All the times Rae had seemed so sad when she helped her patch up some squabble she'd had with Eric, Rae was trying to make Julia happy at her own expense. Rae cared more about *her* happiness than her *own.* Smiling shyly, she knelt down next to her. "Ray? *Forget* everyone else. Will you do it for *me?*"

Sighing wistfully, Rae knew she'd been beat. She *couldn't* refuse. Standing up with Julia, she nodded. "Alright. For *you.* But *only* for *you!*"

The two walked back into the backstage area where Rae was mobbed with hugs from Kate and Lisa.

"Thank you *so* much, Rae!" Lisa bubbled. "You are *so* saving our butts!"

Kate simply bobbed up and down on the balls of her feet ecstatically.

"Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you! Thank you!"

After the trio separated, Kate handed the black tank top and other items Brian was supposed to wear to Rae. "*Here!* You better get changed *fast!* You're supposed to go on in like *two minutes!*"

While the school jazz band finished their last number, Rae slipped into one of the backstage bathrooms to change. Just as she closed the door, she saw Eric glaring at her, fuming, and approaching fast. Glad that the rooms were single occupant, she closed and locked the door. Seconds later she heard the knob being tried, while her heart raced.

Pulling off the sweater-vest and tie she wore, and quickly undoing the buttons on her white long-sleeve shirt, she pulled the T-shirt off over her head and dropped the loose tank top on. She swam in it since it was fitted for Brian, but once she'd changed into the torn jeans and ratty tennis shoes, and using her belt to make the pants stay on, she tucked in the tank-top, opened the door, and almost ran for the left stage entrance.

Getting there with only seconds to spare, she closed her eyes and took a deep breath as Kate and Lisa looked her over and made a few last-second adjustments to her outfit. When she opened her eyes and looked across the stage, she saw not only Keith, the other boy in the duet, but behind and to the side of him was Julia, looking directly at her with a serious expression.

"You can *do* this." Julia mouthed as the audience applauded the Jazz Ensemble's finale.

"For *you*." Rae mouthed back. "This is all for *you*."

When the applause died down and the intro to the song *Cool* began, Rae focused on the number and ignored the audience. As far as *she* was concerned, there was an audience of *one*; just *Julia*. She stepped out on the stage snapping her fingers in time to the beat and went through the number just as she'd taught it to Brian, and sang the song she'd known for years.

The one part she worried about was near the end. In the non-vocal bridge before the last chorus, the two would each strut to opposite sides of the stage in time to the beat, then turn suddenly, run straight towards each other, drop to their knees mid-stride, and slide past one another on their knees. Then jumping up, finish the last chorus and walk off the stage snapping like nothing had happened.

The two pulled it off flawlessly, which sparked applause and screams from the audience that almost drowned out their last chorus. Leaving the stage while snapping in time to the music, the audience roared with applause, but Rae only cared about one person's opinion of her performance. Julia however, was nowhere to be seen.

Lisa and Kate were giddy as they jumped up and down while hugging Rae and squealing with delight.

"You were *perfect*!" Lisa squeaked. "*Totally* awesome, Rae!"

"*Yeah*!" Kate added as she hugged her two best friends. "You *rocked* that final move!"

"*Thanks*!" Rae shyly accepted. "Did... did either of you see which way *Julia* went?"

The two girls looked at one another knowingly and then at Rae. "Um... I think she's *outside*... with *Eric*."

Rae's smile fell like rain. "*Oh. So then... she didn't see?*"

Lisa tilted her head. "*Rae! I know you're like crushing on her, but like, she's with Eric! Besides, after tonight, I think you could get any girl in the choir that isn't tied down!*"

"I don't want *any* girl, Lisa." Rae shook her head. "I think you *know* that!"

Looking at one another knowingly, Kate and Lisa shook their heads and watched Rae walk over to the small bathroom, leaving her there to change back into her nicer choir outfit alone. When Rae opened the door to come back out, Eric's fist slammed into her belly. Collapsing to her knees, she struggled to breathe.

"Last *warning, faggot!*" he spat at her. "Leave Julia *alone!* Try to steal her from me *again*, and you *die!*"

She would have refuted his false impression, that even though she was in love with Julia she would never try to come between them, but her inability to breathe prevented it. Rae looked around the backstage area and saw no one even seemed to notice what he'd done to her. Standing back up, she leaned against the back wall and just tried to push past the pain and regain her breath before her next number.

Focusing on breathing, despair began to overtake her. *Nobody saw, nobody noticed, nobody cares. These people were never really your friends. You're just a big joke to them. Even Kate and Lisa. You want proof? Nobody was looking out for you! He could murder you and nobody would even notice the difference, because he's popular and you're just the freak! You think Julia cares? Where is she? Where was she when you were busting your ass and potentially humiliating yourself for her?*

Collecting herself, Rae went back into the small bathroom, grabbed some tissues to dry her tearing eyes, and made her way back to the left stage

entrance where Kate and Lisa were waiting to go on with the rest of The Select Choral. None of them noticed the change in her disposition, and when she went on stage, none of them seemed to notice her lack of feeling as she sang her backup part. Rae wasn't even aware of the audience, nor the rest of the choir. She went through the motions until the finale was completed and the choir returned backstage. Then, grabbing her things, she headed for the back door.

"*Rae!*" Kate shouted happily as she moved to congratulate Rae for helping make the concert a success, but her smile vanished as she watched Rae ignore her and push her way out the stage door and into the night.

The following Monday, Rae walked into the choir room and sat at the piano as usual, but the life was gone from her eyes. Her thousand-yard stare had returned and she seemed cold and lifeless again. When the class broke up into groups, Lisa and Kate made their way over to her as she picked out her new melody on the instrument, followed shortly by Jason and Melanie.

"*Rae?*" Kate looked at her concerned. "Is everything *alright?* We all went out together after the concert, but you *left.*"

Melanie, seeming not to notice anything was wrong, was still happy and bubbly. "*Yeah! You totally missed a great get-together!*"

Lisa lightly slapped her on the arm at her seeming indifference to Rae's sour mood. "*Mel! Can't you see something's wrong?*" Turning to Rae, she sat down at the piano stool on Rae's left. "*We missed you after the concert. Why'd you leave? We didn't even get a chance to say goodbye, or thank you, or congratulate you...*"

Rae processed the words, but was lost in her own world of self-loathing. *They're just doing what they think they're supposed to do. Eventually they'll give up on you and move on and you'll still be alone. You're going to die alone.* As the four continued to press for answers, Rae was almost overcome

with emotion and nearly cried, but managed to restrain the feelings and swallow her tears back. "Thanks for your concern." she replied flatly as she continued playing the song she'd composed. "But *really*, there isn't anything anyone can do. Sorry if I disappointed you all. I... I just needed to go home."

Jason, unsure of what was going on or what to say, changed the subject. "What's that you're *playing*? I don't *recognize* it."

Rae shrugged as she added the left-hand harmony. "*Nothing*. Something I wrote."

"When did you write a *song*, Rae?" Lisa asked as she watched Rae begin the bridge.

"Over the weekend." she answered as she returned to the main chorus. "What do you *think*?"

"It's *beautiful*... but kinda *sad*, really." Kate noted. Waiting for Rae to finish, she sat down on the other side of Rae from Lisa. Finishing, and with Jason and Melanie leaning on the piano, the four dropped their voices to hushed tones.

"Rae... what's *wrong*?" Lisa began.

"Did something *happen* at the concert, Rae?" Kate added.

"Everyone thought your arrangement was *wonderful*!" Melanie offered. "You really should have heard everyone *complimenting* you about it!"

"*Dude*! Seriously, what *happened*?" Jason pressed her for why her mood had suddenly shifted sour. "Did *someone*..." Suddenly, all four of Rae's friends looked at one another knowingly as they all reached the same conclusion as though linked psychically.

"Eric!" they all whispered together.

"What did that horse's ass *do* to you, Rae?" Lisa demanded.

"Doesn't *matter*." Rae shrugged. "Nobody *saw* it, so it can't be *proven*. As far as anyone's concerned, *nothing* happened."

"Rae!" Kate exclaimed. "*Tell* us! *We'll* believe you! *Won't* we guys?"

Seeing all four nod in agreement and their looks of concern, Rae sighed and leaned slightly against Lisa's shoulder. "He... uh... *ambushed* me coming out of the bathroom after I changed back into my concert clothes." she explained. "He belted me in the stomach and told me that if I didn't stop trying to steal Julia away from him that he'd *kill* me. I'm *not*, by the way. I'd sooner *skinny-dip* in *Tahoe* than do anything like that." Shrugging and closing her eyes to fight back the tears, she sighed once more. "But like I *said*, no one *saw* it, so it didn't *happen*. He'd just deny it and it's his word against mine, so what use is there in *talking* about it?"

"Rae..." Lisa said in an irritated tone. "You *should* have told us! You're our fourth *musketeeer*! Our *girlfriend*! You can..."

Jason shook his head, stopping Lisa's reply. "Lisa! We really *should* stop with that joke! It's getting *old*, and Ray *deserves* a break from it!"

Kate disagreed. "I don't think of it as a joke, Jason! Rae really *is* like one of us girls to me!"

Hearing Lisa and Melanie agree, Jason still shook his head. "*Ladies*! Don't you think he feels emasculated *enough* already by *Eric* without *you* three *adding* to it? Come *on*! Give the guy a *break*, will ya!" Seeing the three girls pause and consider his argument, he turned to Rae. "*Look*, dude... you're a real *sport* to take it from them, but I just want you to know that to

me, you're a real stand-up guy! *Seriously!* A real *man*. Not some immature *boy* like *Eric!* *Right* girls? *For real?* *No jokes?"*

Seeing the three girls pause and look at one another, Rae knew exactly what they were saying with their eyes. *They're gonna agree with him because it's what they think I wanna hear. They probably don't believe it's true any more than I do, but if I told them the truth they'd all laugh and I'd be a social outcast from then on.* As Rae looked at them, they all three looked down and nodded. Just like that, Rae had lost her honorary girlhood and sank even further into depression.

"*There!*" Jason beamed, thinking he'd done Rae a favor. "*See?* No mater *what* that Neanderthal Eric does, your *friends* all agree that you're more a man than he'll *ever* be!" Waiting for Rae to thank him for standing up for him, his smile melted as Rae got up from the piano and seemed even worse than before.

"*Thanks!*" Rae said snidely. "I gotta go to the *restroom*. Be right back." She almost ran for the door before the tears escaped her eyes.

Chapter 18 - Janus

Rae's depression was not getting any better. In fact, it was getting more severe. After the Spring Concert, the next big thing was Prom. Since most of the students in Advanced Choir were in their third year, most having been required to take regular choir twice before Mr. Hartford would let them audition except in special cases like Rae's, it was the Junior Prom that dominated discussions.

Kate, Lisa, and Melanie had backed off in their inclusion of Rae as their fourth, which only made Rae feel more isolated. Lisa's prediction that she'd be popular for her performance in the duet had also never materialized. It took only the two days of the weekend for her efforts to be seemingly forgotten by all but her friends and their teacher.

She refined and practiced the song she'd written several times using the piano in the choir room, lacking one at home. Titling it *Janus* after the Roman myth of the god of duality to express her dual feelings of love and sadness, she knew the meaning would be lost on most people. She'd written it for Julia and its melancholy melody spoke of a joy she couldn't ever say with words, while simultaneously telling of her sadness that her love, the love of one teenage girl for another, was not only unrequited, but couldn't even even be known or spoken.

The date of the Junior Prom approaching, Rae was getting harassed by her sister Marie to buy a ticket and go, even if it was alone; that she'd regret it if she didn't go. To add to it, Lisa and Kate were begging her to go with the two of them so they wouldn't look like they were going with each other.

Over the past few months Rae had begun to suspect that the reason Kate and Lisa never dated was that they were secretly dating each other, but she had no *proof*. Just a lot of little things that she noticed. The way they would scoff at any mention of dating, the gagging sounds they made whenever Jason and Melanie would display their affection, but most especially the

way they would look at one another when they thought no one else was. Rae knew that look. She'd seen it in Marcy's eyes. Maybe she was wrong, but she didn't think it *likely*.

Rae hated the idea of going to her Prom, mostly because she'd have to rent a tuxedo while all the other girls got to wear the most beautiful dresses they owned. It would just be several hours of torture for her. In the end though, she gave in and bought a ticket and rented a tux. She hated the fuss her sister made about how 'handsome' she looked before she left, and detested the photos her father insisted on taking.

Pulling up in front of Lisa's house near the Middle School she'd attended when she was hit by the car, the accident scene only half a mile down the very street she was on, Rae wondered if she should go up and knock or just wait out front. It's not like Lisa was her *date*. She wasn't. If she went up to the door though, it would certainly *look* like that to her parents. On the other hand, if she *didn't* go up to the door, it might be considered rude or disrespectful. *Besides, how else is Lisa supposed to know I'm here to give her a lift?*

Sighing, Rae opened her door and walked leisurely up to the front porch, ringing the bell and waiting.

When the door opened, it was Lisa's mother who answered. "*Yes? Can I help you?*"

Smiling at her, Rae nodded respectfully. "*Hi! I'm Rae, Lisa's friend from choir? I'm supposed to pick her and Kate up? I'm their ride to the Prom.*" Nervously clearing her throat, she looked down at her feet. "*Can... can you tell her I'm here and waiting? I'll be out in the car.*"

As Lisa's mother Mary looked at Rae, suddenly a light seemed to click on over her head. "*Ray? Oh! You were one of those boys from the concert!*" Her brow furrowed in confusion. "*I thought your name was Brian?*"

Closing her eyes, she suddenly realized the reason she got almost no credit for her performance that night. Few if any people even knew it was her because it was *Brian's* name on the bill, and the majority of the choir wasn't able to actually *watch* the performance as they were getting ready to go on *after* her. "No. Brian was *supposed* to do the number, but he was *sick*. I stepped in last minute. Can you tell Lisa I'm here?"

"*Mom!*" Lisa yelled from somewhere in the back of the house. "Is that *Rae*? I'll be out in a *few!*"

Opening the door to let Rae in, Mary rolled her eyes. "*Teenagers!* I *swear* sometimes you all go out of your way to be *obnoxious!* Won't you come in?"

"*Thank* you." Rae said respectfully. Entering the home, she looked around politely. "Nice *home*, Mrs. Forbes." Now able to see the woman clearly as the glare from the setting sun had blinded her from seeing into the darker interior of the house from outside, she nodded respectfully again as she noticed the woman was dressed obviously for an evening out. "You look *very* nice, Mrs. Forbes. Are you going out *too?*"

Gesturing to the couch, Mary blushed at the compliment. "*Thank* you, Ray... and *please*, call me *Mary*. Won't you have a *seat* while you wait? Lisa's father and I are going out for the evening." Pausing for a moment, she looked at Rae carefully. "Perhaps we should *re-think* that. I didn't know Lisa had a *date* for the Prom. She *told* me she didn't."

"*Oh!* I'm not her *date*, Mrs. ... *Mary*." Rae corrected herself. "Lisa, Kate, and I don't *have* dates, but I have a *car*, so we're all going together as a *group* is all." Laughing a little, Rae looked at the floor. "I'm more like her and Kate's *chauffeur* for the evening! It's no *limo*, but it *runs* and it's *mine!*"

Looking out the front window at Rae's old off-white Ford Grenada, Mary nodded. "I *see*." she said suspiciously. "I can't *imagine* a boy like you not having a date for the *Prom*."

Looking away, Rae held back a tear. "I... The only one I would want to take already *has* a date." she explained; the sadness in her voice clear.

"*Oh!*" Mary exclaimed softly. "Well, it's... um... *their* loss, Ray. You seem like a perfectly *nice* young man!"

Lisa came out wearing a white satin, strapless, knee-length dress with sequins decorating the bodice and crinoline making the skirt flare out slightly. Her hair was done up in a mass of brown curls that were pinned up and held in place by a silver comb, and a rhinestone necklace and earrings completed the effect. "*Well?* How do I *look?*" she asked as she spun slowly in place in her white pumps.

Rae was only just beginning to pull herself together when Lisa came out. Seeing her looking so perfectly dressed only made her certain that the evening was going to be a torment. Standing respectfully, she nodded at Lisa. "You look very *nice*, Lisa." she commented emptily.

"You look *lovely*, dear!" Mary glowed. "*Robert!* Get out here and see your *daughter!*"

Mr. Forbes came out still missing his tie, jacket, and shoes. A large man, his round face lit up when he saw Lisa. "*Well!* Don't *you* look a picture, *pumpkin!*" Seeing Rae standing shyly in the background, his smile melted. "Who's *this?*" he growled.

As Lisa made her way over to Rae to show off her dress, Mary interceded. "That's *Ray*, dear. He's going with Lisa and Kate to the Prom." Looking at him disarmingly, she shook her head at his concerned visage. "They're just *friends*, Rob! Ray's one of the boys that did that *dance* at the concert? He's a perfectly *safe* young gentleman." Her emphasis, and look, let him know she thought Rae wasn't interested in girls.

"Oh..." Glancing judgmentally at Rae, he shook his head. "*Fine*. Just so long as he didn't bring a *date*!" he mumbled.

Lisa happily spun in place again in front of Rae. "You *ready*? You look *nice*, by the way." she added as an afterthought as she adjusted Rae's tie.

"Anytime *you* are." Rae shrugged absently. "You'll have to tell me where *Kate* lives. She didn't give me her address like she was *supposed* to."

Turning to her parents, Lisa almost ran up to them. "You two have fun tonight, *too*! And don't worry about *me*! Me and Kate'll probably come home right after Prom *anyway*!"

Kissing her parents goodbye after some pictures, Rae held the door for her and then ran ahead to the car to open the rear door for her so she and Kate could have the entire backseat to themselves. Running around front, she climbed in and started the engine. Taking directions from Lisa, it turned out Kate's house was only a short distance from Lisa's. Rae didn't even get a chance to get out. Lisa jumped out as soon as they were stopped.

"Wait here, Rae!" she said as she climbed out. "Be right *back*!"

Sitting behind the wheel, that same isolated feeling she'd had on her fifth birthday party she shared with Marie came over her. The feeling like an event that was supposed to *include* her, ended up being about everyone else *except* her; that she was just a supporting character in their story. Near to tears once more, she waited until Lisa opened the rear door once more and Kate stepped into the back seat. Rae didn't get much of a chance to see Kate's dress before Lisa climbed in after her, giggling gaily.

"To the *Prom, driver*!" Lisa joked, getting an arm slap from Kate. "*Hey*!"

"That was *rude*, Lisa!" Kate admonished. "Rae isn't our *driver*! It's *his* Prom, *too*!"

Rae just shook her head. "*That's* OK, Kate. I'm only even *here* because you two needed an escort. Otherwise, I would have just stayed *home*."

The two girls in the back seat looked at each other and then at Rae before Lisa spoke up. "I'm *sorry*, Rae. I guess this isn't going to be very *fun* for you tonight, *is* it?"

"It's *fine*." Rae answered choking back the pain as she pulled into traffic. "At least I can say I *went*."

It would end up that would be all she *could* say. They arrived at the casino hosting their Prom, Rae walking behind Lisa and Kate as they made their way to the ballroom. Finally able to see Kate's dress, she was green with envy. It was a black velvet sleeveless cocktail dress with a tiered bright pink flared skirt of satin, very similar to the dress Rae had seen at the mall that she would have worn if she could. The only difference was that the dress *she* wanted had a skirt with a lighter shade of baby pink, with a brocade of large slightly lighter circles imbedded in the fabric. Kate's long black hair draped her neck in ringlets that moved with her while she and Lisa held hands as they walked in.

Eighties music filled the room as they were directed to the photographer. As Rae expected, Lisa and Kate got their photos together, while she had to stand alone for hers, not that she got one *anyway*. She hated seeing herself in pictures as they were just painful reminders of her reality.

The evening progressed the way Rae had assumed it would. She sat and listened to the music and the sound of her classmates enjoying their time, while she sat alone at the table munching on bowls of party mix and envying every girl there. Kate and Lisa spent most of their time dancing together, and when they were at the table just talked to each other. Meanwhile, Melanie and Jason had eyes only for each other and Rae was just a third wheel to both couples. When Spandau Ballet's *True* came on and she spotted Julia slow dancing with Eric, with no one else at the table at the

time, she got up and headed for the restroom to escape the song and the memories it churned up for her. Hiding in a stall, she quietly sobbed alone.

She wasn't sure how long she stayed there, but it must have been quite a while as by the time she returned, she saw people were starting to leave. Spotting Lisa and Kate still sitting at their table with Melanie and Jason, she returned solemnly.

"Where've *you* been?" Lisa asked concerned. "You missed the *ceremonies!* We thought you might have *left.*"

Looking at Rae as she glumly sat down, Jason shook his head. "*Jeeze, dude! Way to bring down a party! You look like your dog died!*"

"*Sorry.*" was all Rae could manage as the four looked at her.

"I guess this wasn't a very good idea." Kate acknowledged. "I mean, for *you.* I'm *really* sorry tonight was such a *bust* for you, Rae. Did you have *any* fun at all? I don't even think I saw you dance *once!*"

"I... I *didn't.*" Rae admitted sadly. "No one to dance *with.*"

"You could have danced with *us!*" Lisa pointed out.

Shrugging, Rae dismissed the idea. "You all looked like you were having fun just fine without *me* to drag things down."

"*Rae!*" Kate shouted a whisper. "*Stop* that! You're one of our best g... *guy* friends!" she stammered looking at Jason. "We want you to be *happy*, but it seems like ever since the concert you've... you've been... *different...* distant... not *yourself!*"

Lisa and Melanie nodded in agreement. "*Yeah!*"

"What's *really* going on with you Rae?" Lisa probed. Pausing a moment, she looked at the others at the table. "It's not something *we* did, is it?"

Rae looked up at the three girls with a pained look of longing. *Oh God, girls! I... I wish I could tell you! Tell you that I am your best girlfriend and that I like it that way!* She glanced over at Jason and her spirits plummeted. *But... I... I can't! If Jason weren't here and it was just the four of us, maybe... but I can't risk Jason's reaction in this crowd! If he took it badly, I'd be outed before he realized what he'd done to me.*

Shaking her head glumly, Rae looked down at her hands. "No." was all she answered not wanting to lie, but doing so to spare their feelings.

When the five headed out together, her sadness had brought down their mood as well. Going their separate ways at the valet when Jason and Melanie got in his parents' borrowed car, the three stood together silently as they waited for Rae's old transportation. Opening the rear door for them as it arrived, Rae tipped the valet driver and got in.

"Where we going?" Rae asked as she exhaled and put on a false happy face.

"My place!" Lisa smiled. "Can you *stay* a while, Rae?"

Shrugging lightly, she nodded as she put the car in gear. "I *guess*, if you *want* me to."

The drive back to Lisa's home was almost silent as the two girls in the backseat kept whispering something to each other, each time looking at Rae in the rear-view mirror and giggling. Feeling like she was the butt of some joke, by the time she pulled up in front of Lisa's house Rae wasn't feeling like spending more time with them anymore. "I really *should* be getting *home*, I guess. You two don't need *me* around bringing things down again."

The two looked at one another, smiled, and got out on the driver's side. Standing next to the blue driver's-side door that Rae had bought from a junkyard and installed to replace the destroyed door from her trip to the ocean, they waited until Rae rolled down the window, ostensibly to say goodbye to her. Once the window was down, Kate leaned into the window as though to give Rae a hug goodbye, only to grab the car keys, turn off the motor, and take them as she laughed.

"Come *on!*" Rae whined. "Give them *back!*"

"Not until you come *inside!*" Lisa demanded. Smiling wickedly, she leaned against Kate. "My parents will be gone *all night* and they have a bottle of *tequila* they won't miss!" Prancing toward her front door as she dug into her little white clutch for her house key, Kate followed her walking backward and looking at Rae still sitting in her car.

"*Well?* Come *on!*" Kate said smiling.

Shaking her head and half smiling at their attempts to improve her mood, Rae rolled up her window and got out, locking her door and slowly following them in. As the two girls disappeared into Lisa's bedroom, Rae sat on the couch once more. "I guess I'll just wait *here.*"

Several minutes passed as Rae sat uncomfortably and listened to the sound of giggling girls from the next room. Rae was about to ask for her keys back when Lisa came out wearing a cotton nightgown followed by Kate wearing a satin one. Feeling uncomfortable, she stood and turned away from the two nearly naked sixteen year old girls she considered the best friends she'd ever had. "I... I should probably *go.*" Looking briefly at the two girls, Lisa carrying a partial bottle of tequila, she blushed and looked at the floor again. "You two don't need *me* to have fun... you... um... have each *other.*"

Looking at one another again, this time with a look of surprise on their faces, Kate fidgeted with her fingers as she walked toward Rae while Lisa

got some cups out of the cabinet. "W...what do you mean by *that*?" she asked innocently.

Shaking her head, Rae sighed. "You think I'm *blind*, Kate? Give me a *little* credit! You two look at each other the way my old girlfriend Marcy and I used to look at one another! Don't *worry*, I won't *say* anything to anyone! I haven't *yet* have I? I've sorta known for a few *months* now, and I haven't let on in *all* that time, *right*? I'd be surprised if Mel and Jason don't *already* know, though."

The two listened to Rae, looking at one another again, smiled shyly, and looked back at Rae. "You won't tell anyone what you *suspect* will you?" Lisa asked diplomatically. "You *promise*? Something like that getting around could *ruin* our rep!"

Rae shook her head and put her hand over her heart. "I *promise*. I won't say a *word*. I... I'd be sort of a *hypocrite* if I did. You two are my best *friends*."

Running up to her and giggling as they hugged her, the two girls practically knocked Rae to the floor. "*Rae!* You're the *best!*" Kate burred. "Julia's an *idiot* for not dumping Eric for you!"

"*Totally!*" Lisa agreed as the two girls sat on the floor next to the coffee table.

"You'd be like the *best* girlfriend anyone... *oops!*" Kate clapped her hand over her mouth at the slip of her tongue. "Oh *Ray!* I'm *so* sorry! I didn't *mean* it!"

As Lisa's eyes shot open at Kate's comment, she looked at Rae and tried to cover for Kate. "It's just, ya' know... we got sorta used to thinking of you like that 'cuz of the sorta running gag we've had all year! I'm *sure* Kate didn't mean to imply that you're..."

Rae held up her hands to forestall the chorus of apologies for a comment she took as a compliment. "It's *fine! Really! Forget* what Jason said! I don't *mind! Honest!*"

Kate, still feeling bad, wanted to be certain. "Are you *sure* Ray? I mean, we all *know* you're not *gay!* You're too much in love with *Julia* to be *gay...* and you said you used to have a *girlfriend...* so..."

"*Two*, actually." Rae corrected her. "Harmony when I was ten, and Marcy when I was fourteen." Getting a distant but soft look in her eyes, Rae stared away as though she could look through time. Before she realized it, a cup was being pushed into her hands.

"*Here!*" Lisa demanded. "We all three drink together! One... two... three!" The two girls pouring the yellow liquid down their throats, Rae looked at it and almost put it down, but figured the girls might be hurt and offended that she didn't join in, so she took a sip and nearly choked.

Seeing Rae's reaction to the first drink of alcohol she'd ever tried, the girls giggled to one another. "*Jeez*, Rae! Way to *chug* it, *girlfriend!*" Lisa laughed. "Kind of a *lightweight?*"

Kate held her giggles back as she shook her head to dismiss the revulsion of the taste. "*Blech!* I don't *blame* her! This stuff is *vile!*" Seeing Lisa look at her with a shocked expression, she looked from Lisa to Rae. "*What?* It's *nasty!* I can't see how you can *stand* it, Lisa!"

Finally collecting herself, Lisa shook her head. "Kate! Didn't you *hear* yourself? You called Rae *her!* I know I called her *girlfriend*, but..."

Rae put the cup down as she moved from the couch to the floor with the other girls. "It's *fine!* I *really* don't mind!" Taking a breath and closing her eyes, she almost told them the truth, but balked and decided to just hint at it. "It wouldn't be the *first* time I was called a girl, and I don't think it'll be

the last, *either*." Looking up at the two girls from one to the other, she almost hoped they would get her hidden meaning.

"*Rae!*" Lisa sighed. "We're *not* making fun of you! We *swear!* Right Kate?" Seeing Kate nod in agreement, she turned back to Rae. "We only mean it like... well... a *compliment!* You *know?* Like you're just like one of *us!* Girls are *way* better than *guys*, right?" Looking over at Kate, Lisa got a devilish grin on her face. "Maybe you'd be more comfortable if we made you *look* like one of the girls!"

Swallowing hard, Rae began to feel cornered. Looking over at Kate and seeing the same mischievous look in her eyes, Rae shook her head. "You're *joking*, right?" When they didn't answer, the feeling of being cornered turned into a feeling of panic. *I know I shouldn't want them to, but if I don't leave right now I think I just might let them!* Standing up and shaking her head, she took a final sip from the cup they'd given her and put it on the coffee table. "I think I need to go *home* now." Terrified as images of the two girls pushing her to be Rachel openly entered her mind, and the disaster that would follow, she held her hand out. "*Keys?*"

Looking at one another disappointedly, Lisa reluctantly got up and went off to her room to get them. While she did so, Rae helped Kate to her feet.

"You *sure* you want to go, Rae?" Kate asked sadly. "We *promise* not to try to dress you like a girl! It was *just* a joke! Come *on!* Don't *leave!*"

Rae shook her head as Lisa came back out of her room looking upset. "I think you two would have a *lot* more fun without *me* here. You don't need any third wheels stopping... well... *whatever!*" Taking her keys as Lisa handed them over dejectedly, Rae walked toward the door. "Hope you two have a good rest of your night!" she said half smiling. "See you Monday!"

"*Bye, Rae.*" they said together sadly as she closed the door behind her.

Walking the path toward her car, Rae got in and sat in the driver's seat but didn't start the engine. *I should have told them the truth.* she chided herself. *They're the best friends I've ever had! It's not like they'd be in any position to pass judgement on me!* Considering going back up to the door and just leveling with them, she got as far as getting out and locking up before changing her mind as she started walking down the street.

Before long she found herself once more at the site of the accident where she nearly lost her life. The bloodstains long gone from the asphalt, she looked at the place that had changed her life. Nearly dying at age fifteen, her biggest fear that she would be buried as a boy and not a girl, had changed her. It was that thought more than anything as she sat by the ocean that led her to try to be herself. Not wanting to go back to Lisa's house for fear that she might go in and tell them the truth, Rae instead walked home. By the time she reached her father's house, her ankle was aching from the five-mile journey. Stumbling and limping into the house, she saw her sister still up.

"I didn't hear your car, Raymond!" Marie said softly, not wanting to wake their father. "Where *is* it?"

Shrugging, Rae headed for her bedroom. "I left it at Lisa's house and walked home. I'll go get it in the morning. 'Night."

"*Wait* a minute!" Marie whispered as she jumped up and stopped Rae's retreat. "You were at a girl's house after the Prom? Is this Lisa..."

Rolling her eyes, Rae stopped her sister. "Lisa's my *friend*, Marie! Nothing *more*! I gave her and Kate a ride to and from Prom because they *needed* one and they're my *friends*! We got back, they invited me in, changed, got some drinks, and offered me some. I had a sip and walked home because I wanted to think about some things. Don't go looking for more than is *there*, OK?"

Crossing her arms, she stood fast in Rae's path to her bedroom. "So, this Lisa... her parents were just fine with her offering you a drink and them

changing with you there? They weren't *there*, were they, Ray? Ray... tell me the *truth*. Are you *gay*?"

"*What?*" she shouted in a whisper. "*Marie! Really?* I get enough of that shit at *school*, I don't need it from you *too!* You *know* I fell in love with Harmony when I was like eight years *old!* *I'm. Not. Gay!*"

"I don't *believe* you!" Marie snapped back. "There you were, a seventeen year old boy, invited to be *alone* in a house with *two* sixteen year old girls, who changed with you *there*, and offered to *drink* with you... and you decide to *walk home?* That says *gay* to *me!*"

Sighing, Rae shook her head. "They're my *friends*, Marie! You think they were offering to... you know..."

"Have *sex?*" Marie exasperatedly finished for her. "*Yes!* God, are you *blind* or just *stupid?* They were practically *throwing* themselves at you!"

Turning away, Rae stormed back into the living room. While they were still whispering, she was doing so at a yell. "You know, not *everyone* is so eager to give it *up*, Marie! I'm *waiting!* *Jeez!* Didn't Dad ever talk to you about what sex *means?* It's supposed to be like, the ultimate expression of *love* when words won't *suffice!* It's a *gift* I fully intend to give to my *wife* someday! Besides, Lisa and Kate aren't *like* that! They weren't trying to get me into *bed!* You know it *is* possible to have friends that are girls and *not* want to *sleep* with them!"

"Not for a straight *guy* it isn't!" Marie spat back. "*God!* You are *so* repressed it's not even *funny!* Don't you *want* a girlfriend?"

"*Yes!* Of *course* I do!" Rae retorted. "But Lisa or Kate? *Believe* me, they *aren't* interested in *me...* not *that* way... and I'm *not* interested in either of *them!* They're just my g... my *friends!* Not like..." Rae stopped herself as

she realized Marie was too close to getting her drop her guard as her feminine mannerisms and patterns of speech started to show.

"Not like *who*?" Marie probed. "Is there *another* girl that you *do* like, Raymond?"

Pushing Marie away, Rae stormed into her room. "Not that's any of your *business* Marie, but *yes*! But she already *has* a boyfriend, so I get to just be the huge *looser* that got to *watch* her dance *all night* with him while all the *rest* of the girls there *snubbed* me because *you* practically *made* me go to that *stupid dance*! Thank you *so very much* for that, by the way! Now leave me *alone*! I don't think I can *take* much more of *your* kind of help! Good *night*!" Turning with a sneer, Rae stormed off to her bedroom, only starting to cry once she was in bed.

The next morning Rae got on her bike and rode the five miles back to Lisa's house. After she put her bike in the trunk of her car, she noticed that Lisa's parents' car was *still* not back in the driveway and it was almost noon. Thinking about what Marie had said, and about what she had nearly told her two friends the night before, she briefly considered knocking on their door and finally telling them the truth about just who their friend Rae was. In the end, she just got in her car and drove home.

Chapter 19 - The End is the Beginning

The end of the school year was nearing and the orchestra, choir, and ROTC would all be part of the commencement ceremonies. As head of the Rifle Drill team, the assignment of the color guard and seeing to it that they were prepared was her responsibility. In addition, as first chair viola, she couldn't be absent from her seat. Lastly, as part of the Select Choral, she and the other five members would be singing a special selection for the graduating class, as well as being part of the entire school chorus. This made Rae one of the busiest people there, and she wasn't even supposed to graduate until *next* year.

The month since Prom had been rough on Rae. On top of finals, graduation prep, and practices, her friendship with Kate and Lisa had become strained. She didn't *blame* them. Rae knew that there was something between them and it made them uncomfortable that she knew, so she gave them their space. That left just Jason and Melanie, and they were having a spat and not speaking to one another. After all that, Julia had been keeping her distance ever since the concert, so Rae once again found herself alone most of the time and it was wearing her down.

The more isolated she became, the more she wrapped herself in her cloak of false masculinity. While she hated it, it did serve one valuable purpose. It kept her safe by keeping people at a distance.

The day of the Senior class commencement practice was a normal day for the other grades, so after the last class of the day, the ROTC color guard, orchestra, and choir were all heading to the local events center to begin preparations for the practice. Wearing three hats, and potentially needing to go back and forth to school, Rae decided to drive herself there instead of riding the school bus like most the rest of her class. After finding a place to park, she raced to catch up with the other members of the choir, hoping that maybe with everything that was going on, her friends would all be more amenable with one another... and thus with her as a consequence.

Walking up to the events center, she saw most of the choir still outside and milling about on the stairs leading up almost fifty feet to the mezzanine level. The rest were going in and out of the lower level through the massive tunnel set into the outdoor concrete stairs. Looking for her friends, she finally spotted them, but in doing so came to a sudden halt. Lisa, Kate, and Melanie were all standing up at the mezzanine level around the railing surrounding the tunnel and talking to Julia... who was standing on the *outside* of the railing.

Julia was going to jump.

Vaulting the steps two at a time, Rae ran up to the mezzanine level as fast as her feet could carry her. She didn't know what it was that had Julia so upset she was considering *killing* herself, but there was no way she was just going to stand by and let her do it. Catching her breath following her rapid ascent, she saw Jason standing off to the side. "What the hell's she *doing*?"

"I don't *know*, man!" he answered frustratedly. "As soon as we got here, Julia starts climbing the steps, then she climbs over the rail and looks down! I was gonna tell a *teacher*, but Mel made me wait to see if they could talk her out of it so she doesn't get thrown in the *nut* house!"

When Rae started to slowly approach the four girls, Lisa saw her coming and shook her head. Moving toward Rae, she tried to get her to leave. "Rae, *seriously*, you should *go*. You don't wanna *be* here right now!"

Looking past Lisa at Julia, Rae shook her head. "You know *better* than *that*, Lisa! If Julia is in *trouble*, then I *need* to be here! Of everyone she *knows*, you know I'd sooner jump *myself* than let *her*! Did she tell you *why*?"

Lisa shook her head. "None of us has gotten through to her. She won't *talk*, Rae. I think she's really gonna *do* it! That's why you gotta *go*! You can't *see* this! It'll *kill* you!"

"That's what I'm *counting* on." Rae said as she stepped around Lisa. Approaching Kate and Melanie, Rae waved them back. "Let *me* talk to her." Slowly approaching, she cleared her throat. "*Julia? What're you doing?*" Hearing no answer and seeing the girl start to lean forward slightly, Rae moved up closer. "Julia, *stop*. If you *fall*, it'll kill me, *too*. You'll be murdering my *heart*. *Please*, just... *talk* to me!"

Leaning back again, Julia shook her head. "It's no *good*, Ray. I... I *have* to!"

"There is *nothing* that could be so bad you need to *die*, Julia!" Rae countered. Even though she'd been close to suicide twice in her life, she knew that with time, whatever it was that was bothering her could be dealt with another way.

"I'm *late*." Julia said simply.

Stopping her approach short, Rae gulped. *Oh*. Resuming her encroachment, Rae shook her head. "That's no reason to *die*, Julia. Life isn't *over* just because you might be *pregnant*, right? Maybe this is a *good* thing! Maybe it'll bring you and Eric closer *together*!"

Julia looked over at Rae as though she'd just sprouted horns. "*What? Ray! I know* you're in *love* with me! Why would *you* say that it would be a *good* thing? You wish Eric and I would break *up*!"

"No I *don't*!" Rae argued. "Yes, I love you. *There!* I *said* it. So *what?* You don't love *me*, and I wouldn't try to *make* you. I sure wouldn't want you to have your heart broken just for *me* to have a chance! I mean... who am I? *Nobody!* You should *tell* Eric! I bet he's *thrilled!*"

"I *did*." Julia sniffed. "He told me *'That's your problem!'* and walked *away!* I just want to *die!*"

Now less than a foot away, Rae reached out a hand and touched her shoulder. "Julia, you *can't* do this! Are you *seriously* going to make me watch you

die? Because I'm *telling* you... you jump and you *won't* be alone! I'll be right *behind* you!" As Julia turned to face her, Rae smiled. "Julia... *forget* everyone else. Will you do it for *me*?"

Julia smiled as Rae repeated the words she'd used to get Rae to dance at the concert. Sniffing back a tear, she nodded and slowly, with Rae's help, climbed back over to the safe side of the railing. Immediately, the three other girls encircled her and led her to the stairs. While Rae followed the other girls down, Julia sobbing as they went, she saw the nightmare coming.

Eric came out of the building and saw Rae just as she was helping Julia back over the railing. Seeing it as Rae challenging him to make good on his threat or back down, he grabbed his friend Robbie, the same boy that had helped William torment Rae in Middle School, and the two ran up the stairs to put an end to Rae's interference. As soon as he reached Rae, he slammed a fist into her belly. "I *warned* you, *faggot*! Now you *die*!"

Rae collapsed in a heap on the stairs. Her breath knocked out of her, she didn't care what happened to her. She'd helped Julia and that was all that mattered. "I was just trying to *help* her!" she managed to eke out.

"She doesn't *need* your help, *fairy*!" he spat at her. "*Julia*!"

As he yelled her name, the three girls started to step back at his threatening tone before standing their ground in her defense. Even as they did so, Julia gently pushed them aside and went to him meekly. "*Yes, Eric?*"

Putting his arm around her shoulder possessively, he turned her down the steps and away from Rae, who was still lying on the concrete slabs. Giving her a parting glance, Eric sneered at Rae. "I'll deal with you *later*, loser!" Turning to the others he added, "Anybody *helps* him, they pay *with* him!" Leading Julia down the stairs, Robbie stood between Eric and Rae and watched to see if anyone would help her. Eventually, the trio moved away toward the safety of the ground below.

Looking around to her three friends and Jason, Rae watched as all four turned their backs on Rae and went down the steps without offering her so much as a hand up or even a word of sympathy. *None* were willing to risk Eric's wrath by coming to her defense.

Now completely alone, Rae dejectedly pulled herself to her feet and made her way down the steps. Intent on doing the right thing, Rae sought out their choir teacher. *I am not going to let him get away with hitting me without consequences!* she told herself. Finding Mr. Hartford, she tried to get his attention.

Gary Hartford was being pulled in six different directions at once. When Rae tapped him on the shoulder, he was already frustrated with getting everything ready in the next hour for the rehearsal. "What do you need, Ray! I'm *really* busy!"

"Mr. H, I need to tell *somebody*. Eric punched me and threatened to *kill* me!" Rae stated painfully though her still aching diaphragm.

Looking Rae over, she couldn't see any obvious signs of injury, so took Rae's complaint of assault as though it were just a minor thing. "*Look*, did anyone *see* him hit you or *hear* him threaten you? And, just being honest here, you don't *look* hurt to *me*."

Nodding, she sighed again as she worked to control the pain. "Kate, Lisa, Melanie, Jason, and Julia... and Robbie Brooks, but he'll probably deny it because he was *with* Eric."

With a heavy sigh, the educator was forced to follow up on a threat to student safety. While they weren't on school property, they *were* there on a school function, which made him responsible. Locating four of the six witnesses all standing together, he approached them impatiently. "*Alright*. Ray here says Eric assaulted him and threatened him and you all saw and heard it. Is it true?"

Looking at one another, they all nodded slightly in agreement to what they'd been conspiring before the two arrived. If Rae didn't just take it and let Eric do whatever he wanted, questions would be asked about how the whole thing got started. Eventually it would come out that Julia was possibly pregnant and tried to kill herself, likely ending up with her being institutionalized, as well as getting a rep of being a slut. So they decided they should lie to protect Julia who'd been their friend longer than Rae; despite the fact that at Eric's insistence she'd been spending no time the last year with any of the three girls she'd been friends with for years.

"*Sorry, Mr. H.*" Jason said looking away from Rae. "I don't know what Rae's *talking* about."

Rae's jaw dropped as she looked at the four teens, who up to that moment had been the best friends she'd ever had, as they each turned on her.

"I think Rae and Eric have been fighting over Julia, Mr. H." Melanie lied. "But none of us *saw* anything. We were all in here trying to practice for the Select Choral and wondering where *Ray* was."

Turning to Rae, Mr. Hartford glared at her. "I don't have *time* for you to try and get me involved in your teen *drama*, Raymond! I'm considering dropping you from the Select Choral for this! Now I have *work* to do, and I want you *all* ready by the time I'm *done*, alright? *Good!*" At that he turned and stalked away.

Rae looked at her four former friends. "So... that's *it*. Eric says *jump* and you all just *do* it? What were you *afraid* of? You all *saw* him hit me! You all *heard* him threaten to *kill* me! So what... now you don't *care* if I *die*? If we stick *together*..."

"Oh, knock it *off*, Raymond!" Lisa snapped. "Eric's not going to *do* anything *now*! And you dragging Mr. H in could have gotten Julia put away in the *nut* house! Some friend *you* are!"

Kate looked uncomfortable with the situation, but just kept silent while the others tore Rae down.

"*Yeah!*" Melanie added. "I guess what everyone was saying was right all *along!* He's nothing but a creepy *weirdo!* Maybe he *is* a fag after *all!* I know *I've* never seen him dating a *girl!* Or even *asking* a girl *out!* He *probably* just doesn't like *straight* couples and just likes to *ruin* them!"

Melanie's outburst caused Lisa and Kate to recoil slightly as Rae looked at them, hoping they might say something in her defense. Seeing the fear in their eyes knowing she could destroy their rep by lashing out the way they had just done to her, instead Rae lowered her gaze and slowly walked away, never to speak to any of the girls again.

Seeking out one person she knew was there that might help, she found him in the practice procession line and made her way over to him.

"*Peter!*" she called out as she approached. Seeing him look at her, she hoped that perhaps *some* shred of their two-year friendship had been real. "I need *help!*"

Sighing as he looked her up and down, he cocked an eyebrow. "*Ray... I'm kinda in the middle* of something!" he said as he gestured to the preparations for his graduation.

"*I know* you're busy, but I'm in *trouble!*" Rae almost cried. "You know *Eric?*" Rae knew that Peter knew who she was talking about. Among other things, Peter used to be on the football team with him. "He *belted* me and threatened to *kill* me, just 'cuz I was helping *Julia!*"

Rolling his eyes, Peter shook his head and looked down on the girl both literally and figuratively. "*Ray, I don't have time* for your stupid problems! You have an issue with Eric, *you* deal with it! I'm not your *bodyguard!* Time to *man-up!*" At that, the boy who Rae had spent more time with than

any other in his life other than Abe and her father, literally tuned his back on her in her time of need.

Lost and falling further and further into despair, the only friends she'd ever had deserting her, Rae didn't care that she had work to do with the color guard or the orchestra and instead, started to head back to her car. She was going to just go home. Before she could get there though, she saw Eric and Robbie standing next to her car, looking around suspiciously. Ducking behind another vehicle, she made her way around parked cars until she was near to her own and could listen to what they were saying.

"Eric!" Robbie whined. "You already laid him *out* and turned all his *friends* against him! Messing with his *brakes* could get him *killed* for *real* and it could come back on *us*! You think that those four won't turn us in if he ends up *dead*?"

"It's too *late* for that now!" Eric grunted as he tried to get under Rae's car. "They've already denied *everything*, so if they change their story, no one will *believe* them! I heard it *myself*! *Ha*! You shoulda heard *Mel*! She tore him down to the *bone*! I think she never really *liked* him..."

Rae strained to hear what he said next but it was muffled. Thinking quickly, she tried to figure out how to get them away from her car long enough to drive away. Then she remembered she had a tire iron behind her driver's seat. Moving slowly and quietly, she managed to get all the way to her door and quietly insert the key into the lock. Turning it, she knew the noise would give her away, so as fast as she could move, she opened the lock, lifted the handle, opened the door, and reached for her only means to get them away from her car. Grabbing the tool as Eric quickly got up and started for her, she brandished it like a club, which kept them at bay. "Interesting *conversation*. Let's *talk* about it!" she shouted.

Just then, one of the bus drivers came running out of his bus. "*Hey*! What do you think you're *doing* there! Put that *down*!"

As he shouted, Rae froze in place and lowered the tire iron.

Eric pointed at her accusingly. "*Grab him! He threatened to kill me!*"

The driver stormed up to Rae and yanked the tool out of her hands. "Who's *car* is this?" he barked.

"*M-mine.*" Rae stammered. "Th-they were trying to mess with my *brakes!* He's the one that threatened to kill *me!*"

"*Liar!*" Eric shouted. "Robbie's my *witness!* Melanie *too!* They *both* heard him! Maybe Jason or Lisa *too!* I got *tons* of witnesses! You're gonna *fry,* Ray! I'll get you *expelled* and *arrested!*"

"I think you boys need to come with *me!*" the driver ordered. "We'll find these other people and just *see* what they have to say!"

Rae shook her head and backed toward her door. *No! I'm not going in there to have the people who were supposed to be my friends turn against me again!* "You can't *make* me go with you!" she shouted. "I'm *leaving!*" Jumping in her car and starting the engine, she pulled out and raced away back home. Pulling in her driveway, Rae realized she was going to *have* to go back to school to get her things such as her instrument and other items in her locker that she hadn't cleaned out yet. Certain that Eric was going to be waiting for her, she couldn't see any way out of her predicament.

By now Eric's gotten everyone on his side. I'm going to be expelled for a death threat I never made! It's happening again! Why do you hate me God? I've done my best to do what you ask of me! Hearing no words of comfort in her heart, she only felt the icy fingers of fate closing around her neck. *If I'm going down for death threats, then I might as well make them real ones.* she reasoned. Going into the house, she retrieved her father's shotgun and, making sure it wasn't loaded, put it under the front seat of her car. Taking a breath, she looked around her home and sighed. "*Goodbye.*"

Climbing into her car, she drove back to her school. Pulling into a parking space, she saw the busses had returned. Looking at her watch, she noticed it had been several hours since she left the events center. Realizing she'd spent a long time in the driveway just sitting there and thinking of a way out of her situation, she sighed. *He's here... they're both here! I can feel it! I can feel their eyes on me! They knew I had to come back!*

Waiting a moment, she saw them approaching, each one carrying a two-by-four straight for her car. She briefly considered running them down, but memories of her own accident made her shudder. *I could never put anyone through what I went through!* she thought. Taking a breath, she lowered the window of her car door and reached under her seat. Pulling the shotgun up, she pointed it out the window.

Eric saw the barrel pointed at him and stopped cold, dropping his wooden weapon. "Oh, *shit!* He's got a *gun!*"

Running off, Robbie eventually caught up with and stopped him. Telling Eric of Rae's previous bluff back in Middle School, the two goaded one another into going back after her.

Rae lay in the solitary confinement cell in Juvenile Hall thinking about everything that happened in the last three days to get her there. When Eric and Robbie came back, she'd tried threatening them with the shotgun, but they ran up to her. Struggling for the empty weapon, Rae just let go and let them take it. Knowing she was beaten, she got out and walked over to the Office, turning herself in. Eric tried to elaborate on his lie, using the gun as proof of Rae's threats, but the police eventually got the truth. Not from Eric, but from Lisa, Kate, Melanie, and Jason.

Rae never saw them, but learned after the fact from written statements. After the bus driver took Eric inside the events center and collected Eric's 'witnesses', the driver had confronted Eric that he'd seen him trying to cut Rae's brakes. On hearing that Eric tried to make good on his threat to kill

Rae, the four turned on him and had finally told the truth. When Eric tried to lie to the police, it didn't take long for them to find the report the driver had submitted and get Eric to recant his accusation.

But the damage was *done*.

Rae was arrested for brandishing a firearm on school property, booked into Juvenile Hall, and placed in 'protective custody' with a suicide watch due to her obvious signs of severe depression. In the end she just slept. She slept for almost three full days in her cell, haunted by nightmares of her ruined life. It was probably for the best that she was on a suicide watch as she might have taken the opportunity if she'd had the means. She'd refused food for the first two days, but when she was told that if she didn't eat she would be forced to take fluids via an IV, her paranoid fear of needles, caused by a trauma when she was too young to remember, made her eat grudgingly.

The following Monday she was arraigned and it was decided that, due to her circumstances, she wouldn't be charged as an adult. The incident with William worked against her, but the judge, seeing she had a good chance for rehabilitation, opted to be lenient and sentenced her to community service, court-mandated counseling sessions, and one year probation. After which, assuming that the court-appointed analyst agreed, the charges would be dismissed and her juvenile record would be sealed, so it wouldn't affect her adult life.

Rae was released to her father's custody, but was once more just an empty shell. She did as she was told, attended her weekly therapy sessions, worked at the Humane Society for her community service, and saw her probation officer dutifully. She'd been expelled from the school district, meaning she could never again attend public school. So as soon as her community service was completed, Rae obtained her GED with a score in the ninety-ninth percentile and enrolled in the local community college.

In her therapy, Rae quickly determined that the therapist was digging for something, so she gave the therapist exactly what the woman wanted to hear. Her thread of lies was complete, because it was all based on her masculine cloak; the one she'd had *years* to practice and perfect.

In the end the therapist determined that her actions were due to "*misogynistic upbringing, resulting in Ray believing that women needed to be 'rescued' and protected from themselves and their own choices.*" It was a laughable diagnosis, considering Rae was a woman and that the choice she was saving Julia from was the choice to *kill* herself. The so-called expert never suspected that Rae was hiding her true self, that she was a woman trapped in a young man's body. After the year was up, the therapist claimed that due to her 'corrections' in Rae's thinking that she was now safe to be released from probation and the charges were dismissed.

Once the incident was closed and behind her, Rae floated from one short term low-paying sales job to another, while she waited for the US Navy to process her application for enlistment. She still worshiped her father, especially after he moved Heaven and Earth to mount her defense, and was dedicated to making him proud of her by enlisting as he had done. Rae promised him she would repay every penny he'd spent on her legal troubles, even if it took her years. Every cent that she had from her job that wasn't going to rent and food went to repay him. That is, he got her entire check other than gas and oil for her car and she tracked the money until every dollar was repaid. It took her most of a year, but she did it.

When the Navy finally arranged for her enlistment interview, it turned out that her ASVAB scores were so high she could get any job she *wanted*, so she volunteered for the hardest to get into; nuclear engineering. Specifically, submarine duty. The only thing that could stand in her way was her physical and Rae was in excellent shape, but it still would not be easy.

The metal pin that had been inserted into her left tibia to help set the bone had been crushed in place by her new bone growth. So much so, that when

the doctors tried to remove it, only the top few inches came out. The rest would be stuck in her leg until her body returned to dust. Unfortunately at that time, the Navy had an ironclad rule that no enlistees would be accepted that had metal pins or plates in their body. Her recruiters were so desperate to enlist her though that they pulled every string they had to get her sent in for her intake physical. Just after Rae's nineteenth birthday, she was put on a bus and sent to the nearest Military Entrance Processing Station.

Once there, she was processed like any other male recruit. She handed over her most recent x-rays and a note from her orthopedic surgeon testifying that her pin did not limit her movement and that the bone was twice as strong as normal. Then she was sent to re-take her ASVAB. She only had trouble at one point in the math section. It was a problem in differential calculus that she solved easily, but none of the answers to pick were correct and she wasn't supposed to move on to the next problem until she answered it. Deciding to leave it blank rather than give an impossible answer, she finished the test in half the time allotted. Sitting and waiting for permission to leave the testing room for several minutes, one of the recruiters called her to get up and follow him. Taking her test, he led her to a room for her to wait. After another ten minutes, a petty officer came in and took a seat opposite her at the table.

"Mr. Evans. Was it made *clear* to you that you were to answer *every* question to the best of your ability before moving on to the next question?"

Rae sat straight and even and looked directly ahead, her hands folded neatly on the table. "Yes, sir. The directions were *clear*."

"Why then did you not answer question forty-six in the math section?"

"Because there *is* no correct answer, sir." she stated flatly. "The four options given do not list a correct answer. Option C is the closest, but only if you solve using a linear first-order equation which, given the data provided, would need a system of *two* linear first-order differential equations, which

results in a completely different answer than the four provided. If you want me to, I can show you the math, but it's pretty dry. I can just put down C as the closest response if you tell me I *have* to put down an answer, sir."

Pursing his lips, the Petty Officer nodded. "That's *fine*, Mr. Evans. Answer C is *supposed* to be the right answer, but I'll take your word that it can't be solved given the answers available. Please come with me."

After that, Rae was put through her hearing and vision tests, scoring 20/10 on the eye tests and slightly above average on hearing. Then she was told to wait in the chief medical officer's office until he was available to review her case. In every way Rae was just what the Navy wanted. She was in good physical condition, highly intelligent, able to follow orders, unwilling to answer incorrectly, but willing to acquiesce to authority. The only thing standing in the way of her entrance into the military was the piece of metal stuck in her left shin.

While she sat there waiting, she laughed lightly at a cartoon pinned to the chief's corkboard. It was a simple one-frame comic showing Superman being examined at a M.E.P.S. with the caption, "I'm *sorry* Mr. Superman, but until we get more information regarding this Kryptonite allergy of yours, we're going to have to deny your enlistment." Eventually, the chief medical officer came in and sat at his desk.

"OK, Mr. Evans. I've looked at your medical file. I note that the x-ray you provided is almost a year old. Is that the most recent one you *have*?"

"Yes, sir." Rae responded stoically.

"We'll to our medical exam floor and get a *current* one." he smiled at her.

Going through another battery of tests, including x-rays of her legs, spine, neck, and head again, several hours later she once more found herself waiting in his office. The moment the Naval Officer came in carrying her

new x-rays, she knew it wasn't going to be good news just by the look on his face.

"Well, it seems you have excellent bone structure, but that pin in your leg is a *problem*. See, there's no way to *remove* it, short of sawing your tibia in half, and I'm afraid it's a disqualifying issue. I'm *sorry*, son. We could have really *used* someone like you."

"Is there any way I can *appeal*, sir?" Rae asked blankly.

Looking up at her over his reading glasses, he smiled. "I'm glad to see you don't give up *easy*! The *next* step would be to send your application to the Pentagon to ask for a waver. I'll not give you false hope, it's not *likely* to be approved, but it's what we can *do* and I'll put in my recommendation that the waver be approved. I'll see to it your request is sent up for review. In the mean time, we'll go ahead and arrange to ship you back home, so you can wait there and see what happens." Extending his hand to Rae, he shook it firmly. "Good *luck*, Mr. Evans!"

Three months later, after having gotten a better paying job at a computer store doing system repairs, Rae got the letter back from the Pentagon officially denying her request for a medical waver. On top of her poor job prospects, Rae would never be allowed to serve.

Book IV: Reflection and Redemption

Chapter 20 - Time Heals *Almost* All Wounds

Sitting in a nightclub, Rachel Evans was drinking her usual, a mix of orange juice and cranberry juice. Her mother had recommended it as it allowed her to be social without drinking because it looked like a tequila sunrise, so only the bartender knew for sure that she wasn't drinking.

As she sat and listened to the music and watched the video playing on one of the many monitors around the club, this song from the early eighties, she remembered the first time she'd heard it. She was not yet ten and Harmony and Marie were playing the song over and over on their mix tape Rae had helped them record off the radio. It was their favorite for at *least* two weeks, before their next favorite came along.

She'd started coming to this club ever since she turned twenty-one and had been coming back year after year. Her family had taken her out to gamble and drink when she became 'legal', and this was the only place she'd *enjoyed*. It was a monument to memory. Every night they played songs and videos from the fifties through the eighties. If they'd included the forties it would be *all* her favorite music. She cared little for modern pop and alternative and actively *despised* rap. Here there was none of that, and the clientele always seemed to dress a little *nicer*.

In truth she disliked drinking and gambling and thought they were big wastes of time and money. She'd seen too many casinos rake in billions of dollars, so much so that Nevada didn't even need an income tax, to ever believe that gambling was anything other than a giant con game. That, and she could do the probabilities in her head. In either case, all the signs Rae could see pointed to gambling as being a losing game. She also didn't really care for alcohol. Getting even a little buzzed made hiding her nature that much harder when her judgment was impaired.

Getting up, she felt the familiar spike of pain in her knees. Her arthritis, which had gone into remission when she was five, had been slowly coming back over the last years. Her rheumatologist, Dr. Robbins, had tried her on several of the newer treatments available, but the only one that seemed to work, even after all these years, was simple aspirin. She was taking three maximum strength tablets a day and it was showing no further advancement, so she was unwilling to give them up for anything short of a complete cure.

The pains returned and, for the most part, she just endured it. The physical pain was nothing compared to the emotional pain she endured on a daily basis. She'd just turned twenty-one when she'd started feeling the familiar pains, just after she'd gotten a job managing a video game arcade in the same mall she'd gone to playing hooky from school. It was a *menial* job, but the pay was good and it allowed her time to think, time to reflect on things, and most importantly, to hide from herself and others. It had also led her to some old acquaintances.

Not quite a month after taking over as manager, she was in the middle of fixing a pinball machine when she heard a familiar voice behind her.

"Ray? Raymond Evans?"

Leaning up out of the machine, safety glasses protecting her eyes, the twenty-three year old woman looked around to see Jason Dudley, Melanie's old boyfriend, pushing a stroller and looking at her as though he'd seen a ghost. "Jason!?! My God!" Catching herself short of wanting to hug him out of instinct, she extended her hand and shook his, making sure she used just the right grip. "Look at you! A daddy?"

"Times two!" Jason noted, pointing at his three-year-old girl playing with one of the toddler games. "I'll have to tell Mel I ran into you!"

Rae's eyes bugged out. "You married Melanie? Well... congratulations! My God! These are Melanie's kids!"

Nodding, Jason absently rocked the stroller back and forth. "So, what have you been up to? Going to school? Seeing anyone?"

Wincing, Rae put down the soldering iron in her hand. "Not much. Working. Still looking for Miss Right. And yes, that's Miss Right!"

Looking away in embarrassment, Jason cleared his throat as he remembered the ugly things Mel had said under the threat from Eric, and how he and the others had lied to their teacher and betrayed Rae for someone they all hated. "Um... yeah. Look... about that..."

"Forget it!" Rae said dismissively. "We were kids, for Christ's sake! When you see her, let her know I don't hold a grudge, OK? I mean it!"

"No! I won't forget it!" Jason retorted. "Yeah, we were kids, but we were supposed to be your friends! When that bus driver told us Eric tried to cut your brakes and actually kill you, Lisa almost fainted! But Kate! Man, you shoulda seen her! She's the one that made the rest of us come clean! She didn't want to go along with our plan in the first place, and was so pissed at how we treated you, she told everything, and then told the rest of us just where we could stuff it! Our whole Senior year she snubbed all of us! Lisa was a wreck! They'd been best friends since like, Kindergarten!"

"Wow!" Rae was stunned. "I can't believe they broke up..." Pausing for just a moment as she realized what she was about to say, she changed directions. "...a twelve-year friendship over it! Makes me feel responsible! What a shame!"

"Women!" Jason joked. "Anyway, Mel felt really bad about what she said to you. If you want, I can give her your number and she can..."

Rae stopped him with a shake of her head. "No, Jason. It's fine... really! Besides, thinking about that time just makes me depressed. I did some pretty stupid things back then that I'm not very proud of. I'm lucky I didn't

go to jail! Actually, I have you four to thank for that, too. But anyway, all water under the bridge now, right?"

Nodding in agreement, the two looked at one another awkwardly, realizing that they really never had anything in common to begin with. The only reason they were ever friends was that Rae was Melanie's friend and he was her boyfriend. If not for that, they would never have likely even spoken to one another.

"Well, I have to get back to work!" Rae interrupted the awkward silence. Extending her hand, she shook Jason's one more time. "Feel free to drop in with the kids anytime! We host birthday parties for a reasonable rate!" As she released his hand, she allowed herself just a moment to be herself and spoke in her natural voice that she'd used for half a year around him. "And please... do tell Mel not to give another thought to those things she said! Deep down, I knew she didn't mean them! Give her my best!"

Pursing his lips uncomfortably, he nodded. "I will. And same to you, Raymond!"

Rae walked slowly out of the club and back to her car, now a slightly less-used Olds soft-top in burgundy. She sighed as she remembered the chance meeting. Still feeling guilty at what had happened to Lisa and Kate, she knew better than to regret things she couldn't change and weren't her fault. Lisa had made the decision to lie and turn her back on her friend, and Kate had made the decision not to forgive her for it.

Remembering the chance meeting, led her mind to another as she stepped out into the warm July air. While managing the arcade she'd hired a young man by the name of Christopher J. Ernst who went by the nickname 'Jay'. While not significant in and of itself, he had an on-again, off-again, girlfriend named Kristine Warren, a.k.a. 'Kris' who had a sister, Kymberly. She was young, just eighteen when Rae met her, and Rae found herself mildly attracted to the young girl. Her family, another Mormon family like

Rae's mother's, were nice, and soon she'd found they were quite welcoming to Rae.

One evening, Kymberly invited Rae over to a family dinner to meet her older brother Bruce and his wife and infant son. The dinner began as Rae expected, meeting Bruce and his family, but when she was introduced to Bruce's wife, a very old feeling of familiarity came over her as she looked at the woman and noticed a look of recognition on the face staring back at her. At first chalking it up to mistaken identity, Rae thought perhaps the woman just looked similar to someone she once knew. She did after all have that sort of face.

Throughout the dinner though, she kept getting the niggling feeling in the back of her head that she was being watched. Glancing around at the Warren family, no one other than Kymberly seemed to be even noticing her, but as they were close to finishing up, she noticed a hint of movement out of the corner of her eye. Glancing to the end of the table, she saw a familiar glance from Bruce's wife, one that seemed to be looking at her and then suddenly darting away shyly. It was the shy glance that did it. Suddenly, a flood of memories she'd long ago repressed as they were too painful came flooding back to her consciousness and Rae stopped eating.

"Is something wrong, Raymond?" Kymberly asked concerned.

Now slightly embarrassed as the entire family stared at her, Rae swallowed and shook her head. "No, nothing is wrong, but..." Turning to the woman who had been stealing glances at her all night, she cleared her throat. "I know you, don't I?"

Looking down and smiling shyly, she nodded. "I think so."

"We went to Middle School together, didn't we?" Rae asked smiling equally shyly. Seeing her nod once again, she took a breath. "Marcy? Marcy Anne Oxford?"

"Ray Evans?" she answered back questioningly. "You're the 'Raymond' Kymberly's been talking about for weeks?"

Laughing, she shook her head. "My God! Nobody's called me 'Ray' in years!" Looking over at Kymberly's mother, she held up her hands in apology for taking the Lord's name in vain. "Sorry, Mrs. Warren! It's just that... well... Marcy and I... we sort of..."

"I think in this case it's understandable!" Kim Warren said stunned. "You two... know each other?"

"Ray was my first crush, Mom!" Marcy admitted. "I... I was so devastated when we moved away to Vegas and it broke us up!" Looking over at Bruce, she looked at him questioningly. "Dear? I love you... you know that, right? But would you mind if..."

Bruce Warren was almost grinding his teeth at hearing that his wife's first love was sitting at the dinner table with his family and now his wife was obviously asking if she could go greet her again... warmly.

Meanwhile, Kymberly was beside herself. Here she had invited the person she intended to be her boyfriend and possibly someday husband over to dinner, and now Rae was completely ignoring her for her sister-in-law... her older sister-in-law.

Just as Marcy turned to Bruce, Rae turned to Kymberly with pleading eyes. "Kymberly. I'm your guest. But..." She looked over at Marcy briefly before turning back to her. "If you say, 'no', it's totally understandable!"

Finally, their father Harold spoke up. "Kymberly? Bruce? These two obviously used to date. Key words... used to. I see no harm in letting them greet each other properly as former friends now that they know who each other are. Right?" Seeing Bruce cowed by his father's wisdom and

Kymerly looking at her plate ashamed for being petty, Harold nodded at the childhood friends. "I think dinner is effectively done now so..."

Even as he spoke, everyone started to get up. Rae held herself back, old pains still aching in her heart, and waited for Marcy to come to her.

Moving as quickly as proper so as to not look too anxious, Marcy made her way around her infant seated in the high-chair between her and Rae and finally, standing next to her, stopped. "Ray! I missed you so much!" she stated plainly as she folded her almost-'boyfriend' into a warm hug.

Even as Marcy hugged her, the pain of their separation filled Rae's heart once more as though it were happening all again. "I... I missed you too, Marcy!" Holding back her tears as best she could, Rae found it impossible. Marcy moving away had set off a chain of events that led directly to her getting kicked out of school.

If Marcy hadn't moved away, Rae wouldn't have become so depressed and disconnected. Happier, she would have resisted William's brutalities without resorting to a gun, and thus she wouldn't have flunked the eighth grade. Thus, she wouldn't have been on that street to get mugged and hit by a car, and wouldn't have been denied entry into the Navy. Lacking her previous attempt at intimidation, she wouldn't have resorted to it with Eric, or even if she had, Robbie wouldn't have had the experience to know she was bluffing.

That one seemingly random event, Marcy's parents moving to Las Vegas, changed the course of Rae's life to bring her here, now. Overwhelmed with emotion, not just with remembrance but the knowledge that Marcy had found love while she never had, Rae couldn't hold back the tears. She wasn't sobbing, but the tears silently fell from her eyes just the same.

Retiring to the living room after hugging a short time, Rae sat next to Kymerly, while Marcy sat next to Bruce with their son between them.

Kymerly's sister, much more rebellious, seemed quite amused at the whole affair, and took great delight in poking fun at all parties involved.

"I can just see you two..." Kris laughed. "...two good Mormon kids... dating! With your cute little hand-holding being as risqué as you get!"

"Kris!" Harold barked. "That's quite enough!"

While their older daughter continued to laugh at the two young people's one-time innocent attraction, embarrassing both Marcy and Rae, their mother Kim wanted to know more. "So, did you two ever go out on a date?"

Both shook their heads shyly, Rae answering in more detail for the both of them. "No. We only saw each other for about six weeks before... well... before Marcy found out she was moving. She... um... she stopped spending lunches with me after that. I guess it just hurt her too much to keep seeing each other when we were gonna be broken up soon, so she thought it better to just end things before we got any more attached. We didn't even go to that Halloween dance together a few days later before she... um... before she moved away."

Marcy nodded sadly. "I felt so bad about that afterwards." she admitted. "Mom, he looked so torn up over it! He walked around for the next four weeks like he'd had a lobotomy! I mean, it was like he was there, but he wasn't there, you know?" Turning back to Rae, she looked at her sorrowfully. "I... If I could take it back, I would. Maybe at least those last few weeks wouldn't have been so hard on you."

Rae shook her head dismissively as she lied once more to protect the feelings of someone she loved. "No, you did what you had to do and that's all a person can do in a situation like that, right? OK, maybe it would have been easier, but we can't know that, can we? It could very well have been a lot worse like you thought, right?"

Rae didn't believe that for a second. She knew that if Marcy had stayed with her those last few weeks, gone with her to the Halloween Dance, even knowing that they were soon to be split up by her parents, it would have been easier on them both. It at least would have given them memories they could have cherished, and time to really say goodbye to one another. Instead, Rae spent weeks pining for Marcy with her right there in front of her every day, making the hurt of the sudden break fester with each passing day until she was suddenly, and without warning, just gone.

Looking at Rae, Kymberly had to ask the question. "Raymond? Why were you crying earlier?"

Taking a breath, Rae lied to hide her true feelings. "Well, to be honest our break-up still kinda hurts. Marcy wasn't my first love, but she was the last one for a really long time... years. It sort of stuck with me and I didn't even try dating for a while after that. A long while."

"How long is 'a long while'?" Marcy asked almost not wanting to know.

"You really wanna know?" Rae asked looking at her seriously. Seeing both Marcy and Kymberly nod, Rae looked at the floor. "I... I've never dated." Hearing the sharp intake of breath from around the room, Rae was sorry she said anything.

"Never?" Marcy said breathlessly. "You mean for seven years you've never gone on a date? Never even liked another girl?"

"Oh! I liked other girls." Rae admitted. "I just never did anything about it. Tonight's the closest thing I've ever really had to a date, and Kymberly made it very clear that this isn't a date... just friends having dinner."

Kris couldn't help herself. "Damn, Marcy! That must be some hand you got! You messed this boy up! You sure you just held hands?"

"Kris!" Harold shouted. "That's enough!"

"Oh come on, Dad!" she retorted. "The poor guy didn't date all through High School and into his twenties because of her!" Looking at Rae, she asked point blank, "Have you ever even kissed a girl?"

"Kristine Warren!" her mother yelled. "That is none of your business! Raymond is Kymberly's guest, not yours! You have no right to ask that!"

Kymberly looked over at Rae. "I do. Have you?"

Looking around the room and seeing no one ready to argue Kymberly's right to ask, Rae shrugged and answered honestly. "No."

"I think we need to go now." Bruce growled. "Raymond? Nice to have met you. Marcy? Grab Byron and let's go home."

Rae giggled at the memory of how quickly her relationship with Kymberly dissolved after that, once more never even going on an actual date. The only thing she'd gotten out of the extremely brief relationship was the cigarette she pulled out and lit as she walked the street toward her car. A week after their dinner, Rae and Kymberly went out for coffee with some of Kymberly's friends, including her older sister Kris, and was dared to smoke a cigarette. Seeing that her potential girlfriend's sister was the one to dare her, and Rae wanting to not look too weak or girly in front of them, she took the dare and to her shock it made her joints stop aching within seconds. Since then Rae had smoked a few cigarettes a day for occasional pain relief.

Nobody believed her for a while, claiming that Rae was doing it to try to fit in and look 'cool', but Rae didn't care if anyone believed her or not. It worked, and she wasn't going to argue with success. *If aspirin and the occasional cigarette gets me through the pain and swollen joints, there are a lot worse things I could use.* Unlocking the door to her car, she slid in

and chided herself for getting in her car like a woman. *Better watch that Rae!* she warned herself. *You never know who's looking!*

She drove home to her father's house where she still lived, this time in a newer home in a much better neighborhood than the doublewide trailer that she'd called a home all through High School. Pulling into her driveway, she sighed and slipped into her 'Raymond' mode again. Her sister and her fiancé Leonardo had been nagging her for an increase in her contributions to the household budget. She was already paying them four hundred dollars a month for food and her share of utilities, and Rae even had to cook two nights a week, so she wasn't willing to give more. She really wasn't in the mood for an argument, so she quietly slipped in through the front door and tiptoed into her room.

'Room' was also a matter of opinion, though. In reality, her room was a den with glass doors that she hung a sheet over for privacy. Slowly lowering her body onto her bed, Rae tried to finish the unwinding from work that she'd begun at the nightclub. Still managing the arcade, her job was becoming more and more difficult every day. Every time she got a few games fixed and profitable again, the company would come and collect them, ship them off to another site, and then dump off three or four more broken games for her to fix. The cycle had repeated itself often enough that she was calling the location, 'The West Coast Repair Center' as a joke to her employees.

Still and all, the pay and the fact that she was effectively her own boss most of the time made it worthwhile. When the district manager would come through town, he would always find something to nit-pick about though; the cost of prizes that she was putting in the claw machine or the difficulty in retaining employees when the attendant job only paid minimum wage.

She *did* have several long-term employees that she retained by making friends with them. There was Jay, the boy who'd led her to re-connect with Marcy, though it was an extremely short-lived re-connection. In fact that night would end up being the last time either of them would ever see each

other or talk again. Then there was Tommie Glennon. 'Tom' was *that* guy, the one who loves to make people laugh. He was the youngest of Rae's circle of friends/employees at only nineteen and had a goofy sense of humor, almost quixotic. It was the *other* employees that tended to drift in and out. Twice she even hired people she went to school with. Not *friends*, but people who she knew like Brian, the boy who ditched the Spring Concert in choir that made her have to dance the number in his place, or Trevor, one of the boys from her ROTC drill team.

It was through Jay that Rae met most of her friends and acquaintances. One in particular was a man by the name of Jack Weaver. He was a former Air Force man, smart, they had a lot in common, and very much enjoyed each other's company. If Rae had been straight she'd have considered him as a boyfriend, but Jack was just a 'big brother' to Rae. He was seven years her senior and the oldest of Rae's friends.

There were others she knew... Joseph, Seth, Spencer, the *other* Spencer, Marc, Larry, and Byron... but Rae didn't consider any of them her friends. They were more like *beards*; friends Rae had in order to make her look like a man. In point of fact, Rae went out of her way to *avoid* spending time with other young women for fear it might make her look too girly. Any time Rae spent too much time around a woman, she always ended up letting her true self show through out of her desperate need to be 'one of the girls' again, so she just made sure to never spend too much time around any. Unfortunately, it was putting a severe damper on her non-existent love life.

Rae's loneliness was becoming desperate. Stretching out on her bed, she thought back on the fun times she'd had with the few people she'd really loved... Harmony... Lisa... Kate... Julia... Kymberly... and even her brief time with Marcy. Her female friendships had always been her most valuable ones. Even in the case of Lisa and Kate where there was no attraction, Rae counted the love of their friendship more precious to her than almost all the others. *If I don't stop avoiding women and make some real girlfriends soon, she pondered, I'm going to go crazy!*

She needn't have worried. Even as she lay there on her bed reminiscing about lost loves and friendships and thinking of ways to be more social without appearing too feminine, life was about to send her in a new direction once more... whether she liked it or *not*.

Chapter 21 - Love, Loss, and Lessons Learned

Valentina Ernst was Jay's younger sister. She didn't care for her name as it was the same as her mother's, so she went by the name Tina, while her mom preferred Val. Rae met Tina one evening hanging out with Jay, Jack, Joseph, and several other friends. Rae tried to keep her distance, but remembering how badly she needed a good female friend, decided to take the chance on one of her friend's younger sisters. She was only nineteen and Rae was twenty-three, but friendships among women can cross generational boundaries, so a four year difference wasn't all that much.

When Rae noticed Tina looking bored as they hung out with their mutual friends, she took a breath and wandered over to where she was sitting. "You look *bored*." Rae stated the obvious. "Hanging out with six guys when you're the only lady can be a bit daunting at times, *right*?"

Tina looked at Rae like she was studying a map. "Only *sometimes*." she replied. "Usually I *love* it, but tonight I'm just *blech*, ya' know?"

Nodding as she sat down near her but not next to her, Rae shrugged. "Not *every* day can be our best! Sometimes it just doesn't pay to even get out of *bed* in the morning!"

Tina laughed a little and relaxed a lot. "You're *Ray*, right? *Jay's* boss?"

"And you're *Tina*, Jay's *sister*. Nice to *meet* you!" Rae extended a hand and shook Tina's loosely. As the boys in the room debated the relative merits of *Command and Conquer* versus *Warcraft II*, Rae and Tina talked about music, movies, TV shows, pets, and themselves. When the evening was nearing its end and some people started heading home, Rae and Tina were still talking.

"So *anyway*," Rae concluded, "*That's* how I ended up with a cat that thinks he's a *dog*, all because my sister's dog was the same color as my cat's mother!"

Tina laughed like a whinnying horse, which Rae actually found a little endearing as it was an honest laugh, one that obviously didn't care what other people thought of it. "Too *funny!*" she said. Seeing Jay getting up and putting on his coat, Tina looked at the time. "*Jeez!* It's after *one!*"

"*Is it?*" Rae asked rhetorically as she looked at her watch. "*Wow!* Where did the *time* go?" Getting up and then offering a hand to Tina, she noticed a sly look in the younger woman's eyes and a slight blush in her cheeks at the gallant offer.

Accepting Rae's assistance, Tina shook hands with Rae again. "It was good ta' get ta' *know ya'*, Raymond! We'll have ta' get together *again* some time!" Her western accent and lazy speech were almost charming, and the lilt of her voice told Rae she was being playful.

Swallowing hard, Rae realized Tina was flirting with her. It hadn't been her intention to look for a girlfriend, she'd honestly only been looking for a female friend she could talk to and possibly 'let her hair down' with. Tina was an attractive young woman, but not the kind who was really Rae's ideal. Honestly, she was coarse, blunt, unladylike, vulgar, and mildly obnoxious; almost the polar opposite of Rae. The weird part was that *Rachel* just wanted to melt into Tina's arms and be carried off into the sunset.

After Jay left with Tina to take her home, Rae sat with Jack as the last two remaining at the diner. "*Wow!* She's *bold!*"

Sighing as he stirred the cream into his coffee, Jack shook his head. "Um... *Raymond?* Are you... um... *interested* in Tina?"

"Well, I wasn't *looking* for anything other than a friend I could talk to, but... yeah. I *guess* I am." Rae said, almost surprised at herself.

"You know I've been waiting *months* for Tina to dump that ogre she called a boyfriend to get my chance to ask her out?" Jack grumbled as he

continued to stir his coffee well beyond what was needed. "What did you go and swoop in like *that* for? It was *my* turn!"

"*Hey!*" Rae defended herself. "Look, I'm sorry if you think you've missed your chance, but I didn't go *looking* for romance! I just wanted a friend, but... I guess we just really hit it *off*." Looking at Jack still stirring his coffee, he tried to cheer up his best friend. "Hey, are you trying to make sure the hydrogen and oxygen molecules are fully *bonded* there, Jack? I *think* it's stirred up *enough!*"

Seeing the smile in his eyes, she knew he wasn't really upset with her. "Where's the *smile!*" she joked. "Come *on!* I *know* it's there!"

"Just shut *up!*" Jack laughed as Rae made him smile when he wanted to be angry with her. "You can be a real *pain*, sometimes, you know?"

Shrugging, she looked down at her empty coffee cup and smiled. *Hey, what are little sisters for!* Dropping two dollars into the tip pile on the table, Rae got up and made herself slap Jack on the shoulder. "See you Friday?"

"Yeah, *yeah!*" Jack grouched as he downed his coffee and stood up. "*Jerk!*"

"*Dufus!*" Rae spat back at him. She thought men exchanging insults as terms of affection was idiotic, but she had to keep up appearances.

"*Looser!*" he countered as they walked out the door together.

"*Wuss!*" Rae continued their moronic conversation.

"Later." Jack finally said as they each went to their own cars.

Climbing in and starting her car, she drove home almost absently. Thinking about Tina's flirting, she smiled before worrying that Jack was really upset with her. Though she'd only known him a couple years, he'd quickly brought

out in her the feeling of having a big brother and loved him as though he were her own blood.

That Friday, when her friends got together again, she took Jay aside at one point to talk to him. "I... um... I wanted to ask you something about *Tina*. Do you know if she flirts just for *fun* or does she only flirt with those she's *interested* in?"

Jay looked at Rae as though she'd asked him to define love. "*What?* How should *I* know? *Tina* does whatever she *wants* to do! *Why?*"

Looking away shyly, she didn't know if Jay would like what she was about to tell him. "Um... well... *last* time? When you brought her with you? She was sort of... um... *flirting*... with *me*."

Jay smiled and clapped Rae on the back, almost making her stumble forward. "*Raymond!* Are you asking my *permission* to date my *sister*?"

"*God* no!" Rae refuted. "I was just asking if you knew if she was actually *interested* in me or *not!*"

"*Dude!* You sound like a High School *girl!*" he mocked Rae affectionately. "Do you know if she *likes* me or *likes-likes* me? Come *on*, man! If you wanna go out with her, just ask *her!*"

"*Alright!*" Rae said defensively. "She lives at home with your parents and you, *right?*" Seeing Jay nod, Rae took a breath. "*Alright* then, I'll call her up and ask! *Thanks!*"

The next afternoon, Rae nervously dialed the Ernst home and waited.

"*Ernst* residence." Jay's father answered. "*Chris* speaking."

"Yes, is *Tina* there?" she asked tentatively. "It's Raymond, *Jay's* friend."

"One moment." the man replied suspiciously. After a short wait, Rae heard someone picking up an extension.

"This is Tina." she almost sang into the phone. "This *Raymond*?"

"*Hi, Tina!*" Rae almost croaked nervously. "I was *wondering*, are you doing anything tonight?"

"Nothing *special*. Just hanging out *here*, probably. *Why*?"

"Well, I was *wondering* if you'd be interested in *dinner*? Do you like Italian?"

"*Raymond*? Are you asking me *out*?" Tina asked with surprise in her voice.

"Well... *yes!* If you'd be *interested*, that is. My *treat*, of course." Rae could feel her heart beating in her ears so loudly she worried she might not be able to hear Tina's response. A seeming eternity passed before Tina replied.

"*Huh*. Were you thinkin' someplace *nice* then? Like a *sit-down* restaurant?"

"That was my *plan*." Rae explained. "That is, if it's what *you'd* like to do."

Pausing another eternity, Tina smiled enough that Rae could hear it over the connection. "*Alright!* Say about *seven*?"

"Seven it *is!*" Rae answered, the blush in her cheeks almost melting the handset. "See you then... *Tina*."

"Bye... *Ray!*" she responded before hanging up.

Pulling up to the Ernst home a few minutes before seven, Rae wanted to make sure she was on time. Checking herself in the rear-view mirror, she fingered a few errant strands of her dark hair back into place before nodding her own approval. It wasn't how Rae would have liked to look for her first

date ever, but it was what was *expected* of her, so she just accepted it as inevitable. Going up to the door, she knocked and waited.

Val Ernst answered the door. "Come on *in*, Raymond!" she said happily. She'd met Rae a few times before when Jay needed a ride and he couldn't arrange one from one of his other friends. The older woman liked her. "Sit *down*. Tina will be a few."

Sitting on their couch, Rae nervously looked over at her father Chris. "*Evening*, sir." she offered respectfully.

Chris looked at her and frowned. "Don't call me *sir*. I did twenty-five years as a Petty Officer and retired as a *Chief*! I *worked* for a living!"

Realizing he'd been in the Navy, Rae stood and walked over to him and extended her hand. "*Apologies*, Mr. Ernst. I'd like to thank you for your *service*, if I may?"

Taking her hand and shaking it firmly, Chris looked her up and down. "You've got the *look*. Military brat?"

Smiling, Rae relaxed some. "My father was a Marine before marrying my mother and joining the National Guard here in town."

"*Jarhead*, huh?" he said with a smile. "You plan on joining up?"

Taking a seat at the kitchen table with him, Rae allowed herself to relax as much as possible without letting Rachel show. "I... I tried to join out of High School. Volunteered for naval sub service as a nuclear engineer, but my application was denied on a medical and the Pentagon turned down my request for a waiver."

Nodding in appreciation, he relaxed some as well. "Why'd they deny you? Bad heart? Poor hearing?"

Tapping her left shin, Rae looked down in shame. "When I was fifteen I was hit by a car. I have a metal pin in my leg that can't be removed."

"*Stupid* rule, if you ask me!" he spat. "And call me *Chris!*" Leaning back in his seat, he looked her over again. "You wanted to be a Navy man? *Why?*"

Grinning as she verbally sparred with the veteran, Rae shrugged. "Best schools in the *services!* Plus... *everybody* knows that the Navy *is* the best branch! The Army just wants guys who can march and shoot straight, the Air Force is just the Army with planes, and the *Marines...* well... the Navy *runs* the *Corps!* To be in the Navy you have to be *smart!*" She knew she was buttering him up a little, but since she honestly believed the Navy was the best branch, it came off sincerely.

Chris chuckled as he nodded at Rae. "Good *answer!*"

Just as the man was about to say something else, Tina walked into the room and Rae wasn't paying attention to him anymore. Her dark hair, normally just pulled back in a ponytail, was curled and styled and hung loosely around her shoulders. A nice dark blue and black pullover top paired excellently with the black knee-length skirt she wore, and black strappy sandals adorned her feet. She was also wearing makeup, which was the first time Rae had ever seen the young woman do so. In all, she looked *stunning*, and not at all her usual casual self.

"*Well?* How do I *look?*" she asked playfully.

Rae gulped as she stood up and was glad she'd decided to dress equally nicely, even though she hated having to wear a vest and tie. "You make me look under-*dressed!*" She was glad her comment made Tina laugh.

Val looked her daughter up and down. "OK, who *are* you and what have you done with my *daughter?*" she joked. "*Tina!* You look *lovely!*"

Chris looked her over and then looked at Rae. "You got her to wear a *skirt*? This *is* serious!"

"*Daddy!*" Tina whined. "I'm not *that* bad!"

"Honey, I *love* you... but the last time *you* wore a skirt, you were thirteen and your mother practically had to *hog-tie* you to get you to *wear* it!"

"*Chris!*" Val chided him. "Don't *embarrass* the girl!"

"Are you *ready*, Tina?" Rae asked tentatively. "I have a seven-thirty reservation for us."

Walking up to Rae almost seductively, Tina smiled that they were almost the same height in her heels. "Lead *on!*"

After the dinner as Rae pulled out into traffic to drive Tina home, she glanced over at her date and smiled. "Did you have a good time, Tina?"

Nodding, the young woman looked out the window of Rae's car. "I *did*, and quite *honestly*, I didn't *expect* to, Ray. You mind if I *call* you Ray?"

Shaking her head, Rae almost giggled. "Almost *nobody's* called me 'Rae' since *High School*, but I think I *like* it when *you* say it!"

Listening to the music playing low on Rae's car stereo, Tina tilted her head quizzically. "Is this a *tape*?"

"*Yeah!*" Rae admitted. "When we talked the other day, you said you like Tim McGraw, so I picked this up yesterday. I hope you *like* it!"

Suddenly perking up, Tina turned and looked at Rae stunned. "I *love* this album! I listened to *mine* so often the *tape* done broke!" Snorting and laughing, she looked like she was suddenly having a lot more fun.

"Then it's *yours* when I get you home!" Rae offered.

Surprised, Tina looked at Rae curiously. "*Ray?* Can I *ask* you somethin'?"

"*Anything.*" Rae said as she turned onto the freeway. "I'm an open *book!*"

"Why'd you ask me out? I mean, you *seem* like a nice guy and all, but... why *me?* Seems ta' me you'd rather be seein' someone that listens ta' *cool jazz...* or *opera...* or *classical.* The *last* thing I'd expect ya' ta' listen to would be *country!* You look like the kinda guy that drinks *martinis...* not *beer!*"

Pursing her lips, Rae nodded. "*OK,* so I like *classical.* I used to play *viola,* before my fingers couldn't take it anymore, but I'm a third generation *native* Nevadan, not some import from *California!* I was *raised* on *country,* Tina. Country filled my grandparents' home where I grew up, and when I say country, I mean *country!* Hank Williams Sr., Johnny Cash, Patsy Cline... I heard 'em *all* growing up and they bring back some good memories for me sometimes." Glancing briefly to look at her, Rae smiled. "But to answer your question, I *like* you for *you...* *that's* why I asked you out!"

"You mean ta' tell me I got all gussied up for *nothin'?*" Tina almost squeaked. "I coulda worn jeans and a *T-shirt?*"

Laughing lightly, Rae shrugged. "I think you look *gorgeous* in that outfit Tina, but I'd have liked you the same *whatever* you wore. I gotta say, you wear this *really* well, but if you'd rather be more casual next time... well... I can do that *too,* if you *like!* I just thought that for my first date I'd like it to be a little classy is all. I hope you don't mind."

Tina's smile disappeared. "*Your* first date? Don't you mean *our* first date?"

"Well, yeah it is *our* first date, and I hope the first of *many,* but it's also *my* first date." Rae said as she changed lanes. "See, I... I've never actually *been* on a *date* before tonight. How'd I *do?*"

"Aren't you like twenty-*two* or somethin'?"

"Twenty-*three*, but *yeah*. This was my first date."

"Holy *Hannah!*" Tina exclaimed as she sat stunned. "You're still a *virgin*, aren't ya' Ray?"

"I've never even been *kissed*." she admitted as she blushed and was glad of the darkness to hide it.

Suddenly going quiet, Tina looked out the window.

"I... I didn't make you *uncomfortable*, did I Tina?" Rae asked delicately. "I didn't *mean* to."

"No, it ain't *that*, Ray." she answered. "I... I just think it's sorta... um... *sweet*... is all." Looking over at Rae, Tina furrowed her brow. "You don't think I am *too*, do ya'? 'Cuz I gotta *tell* ya' Ray, you're *not* my first trip to the *rodeo!*"

"Honestly, I didn't even *think* about it, but *yeah*, I know that *most* people aren't like me. I'm sort of... old *fashioned*, I guess. *Boring* some people might say!" Laughing together, Rae continued. "Yeah, I don't *gamble*. I don't *cheat*. I don't *steal*. I don't take *bets* or *dares*. I don't *fight*. I don't *lie*, except to spare someone's feelings. I *work* hard. I believe in *God* and *America*..." Pausing as she glanced once more at Tina, she concluded, "See? *Boring!*"

"It ain't *boring!*" Tina argued. "*I* can go along with all that! Except I *do* take *dares!*" Laughing at her own joke, Tina looked out the passenger window.

"You *do*, huh?" Rae teased. "Like *what?*"

Hearing *For A Little While* begin on the tape, Tina reached over and took Rae's right hand from off the steering wheel and held it in her own as her voice dropped low and husky. "Like *anything*, Ray! *Try me!*"

Now blushing so much she felt she might burst a blood vessel, Rae stammered for a moment before answering. "I... um... I... I dare you to fall in love with me."

Smirking, Tina looked over at Rae. "Mmm... that's not *really* much of a *dare*, Ray... 'specially since I think I'm already halfway *there!*"

The rest of the trip was in silence, only the music of the tape Rae had put in filling the void. When Rae pulled up and stopped in front of her parents' house, Rae had to make Tina let go of her right hand to put the vehicle in park, but as soon as the engine was off, Tina had taken it back again.

"I *really* had a good time tonight, Tina!" Rae confessed easily. "I could see myself *easily* falling for a lady like you!"

Removing her seatbelt, Tina slid closer to Rae until she let go of Rae's hand and slipped her left arm around Rae's shoulders. "Do I make you *nervous* Ray? You're almost *shivering!*"

"Honestly... *yeah!* You *do*, Tina!" Looking over at her, Rae knew what was coming and thought she was prepared for it, but when Tina leaned in to kiss her on the lips, Rae found herself completely undone. Melting into Tina's embrace as the younger woman took charge, Rae just tried to follow her instincts, only for Tina to suddenly stop.

"W... what's the *matter*, Tina?" Rae stammered as she looked at the odd expression on her face. "Did... did I do something *wrong?*"

"*No.*" Tina said bemused. "It's just... I've never kissed a guy that *kisses* like you do! *Most* guys when I kiss 'em get all handsy and rough, but *you...* I

just... I *dunno*..." Pausing as she considered how to describe it, she looked deeply in Rae's eyes and smirked. "Mind if I do that *again*? Just for *comparison's* sake?"

Rae shook her head and smiled. "I can't think of any reason I would *ever* say no to that question!" This time knowing better what to expect, Rae thought she'd try to be more 'manly' in the kiss, but the moment Tina's lips touched hers, she once more just melted into the young woman's hold on her. Feeling as though she were blowing in a hurricane, she instinctively brought her left hand up into Tina's hair and delicately ran her fingers through the nape of Tina's neck and moaned through her nose. She didn't know *why* she did it, she only knew it felt *wonderful*.

When Tina backed off once more with a puzzled look on her face, Rae gulped in fear. "I... I guess I'm not a very good *kisser*." Turning away from her date embarrassedly, she was surprised when Tina physically turned her face back towards her and practically climbed into her lap to kiss her a third time. Overcome, Rae let Tina drive the situation however she wanted to. When Tina pulled away a third time, Rae just stared at her and waited for her to say something.

"*Wow!*" Tina exhaled heavily. "That was..." She paused while she searched for the right words to use to describe the kiss. "...*different!*"

"Different *bad*, or different *good*?" Rae probed delicately.

"Um... just *different*?" Tina answered. "Don't get me *wrong*, it was *nice*... I *liked* it... it's just..." She stopped and looked at Rae seriously. "Well I know *one* thing for sure... you were telling the *truth!* That really *was* your first kiss!" Laughing in her usual obnoxious nasally way, it made Rae smile knowing it was meant as a compliment. "Walk me *up*?" Tina asked.

"*Sure!*" Rae said happily as she ejected the tape and handed it to her. "Let me get the door for you!"

Moving back over to the passenger side, Tina waited for Rae to round the front of the car and open her door. When Rae took her hand to help her out, Tina didn't let go once she was outside again. Walking up to the door, Tina shook her head. "It's *funny*, but somehow I feel like *I* should be opening *your* doors and helping *you* out of cars! Lighting your *cigarettes*, maybe?"

While Tina laughed her laugh again, Rae couldn't help but blush and look away. "I... uh... guess I'm just a little *intimidated*. You're like a force of *nature*! Going out with you is like getting caught in a storm! You just sort of... carried me away. I... I'll try and be whatever you *need* me to be, if you give me another chance."

"I think we're gonna have *lotsa* chances!" Tina said as they reached her front door. Looking over at the windows to see if her parents were watching, seeing them clear, she wrapped her arms around Rae's neck. "Call me tomorrow." she stated as more of an instruction than a request. Giving Rae a peck on the lips, she slid out of her grasp and walked into her parents' home. "*Bye, Ray!*"

Standing there as though she'd become stuck in time, Rae eventually walked back to her car. *Rae? You have to do whatever it takes to make that woman happy!* she ordered herself. *She obviously wants a man's man... and if you want to keep her, you're going to have to become what she wants. No more kissing like a timid little girl! No more blushing and looking away! You want her? You gotta change who you are! Maybe this is what you needed all along... a woman to make a man out of you!*

Over the next several weeks, Rae did everything in her ability to become the man Tina wanted. Unfortunately, it seemed that no matter how hard she tried, Tina would get frustrated with Rae's timidity and naturally feminine behavior. Rae tried to make herself more daring and manly in response to Tina's attitude, but it always came off as forced. Tina was more masculine Rae, so in order for Rae to be even *more* so than Tina, it seemed she would have to become someone like *Eric*... and *that* Rae just couldn't do.

Eventually, certain of her feelings toward Tina, Rae decided on a course of action that was impulsive, daring, and something usually only men were expected to do. Gathering her savings, even borrowing against her year-end bonus she wasn't to get for weeks, she went to the jewelry store across from her work and spent five thousand dollars buying Tina a ring. She proposed the last weekend in September and Tina accepted, setting a date for next June; Rae's soon-to-be in-laws' twenty-third wedding anniversary.

When she went home that night to tell her family, Rae was happy and expected to be congratulated. What she got was something else entirely.

"You did *what*?" Marie yelled. "*Raymond!* You're doing this just to beat me to the *punch*, aren't you?"

"*What*?" Rae asked stunned. "What the hell are you *talking* about, Marie? I've been dating Tina for *months*! She's my best friend's *sister*! We've known each other a *while* now, and I think we know what we're doing with our own *lives*! This has *nothing* to do with *you*!"

"*Raymond!*" Marie shot back. "Leonardo and I are getting married next *August*! I think it's too much a *coincidence* that you walk in here and tell us you're getting *married* two months before *me*, to a girl you've only known a few *weeks* and *we've* never *met*? *God*, Raymond!"

"You are such an egotistical *witch*!" Rae blasted her sister. "You think *everything's* about *you*! Here's a *clue* Marie! We don't give a *crap* when you're getting married! But *we're* getting married on Saturday the twenty-first of next June! The same day her *parents* got married! Besides, you have *so* met her! She was here a *month* ago when I had my friends over! We were already *dating* by then! I *introduced* her to you!"

Leonardo had been silent up until then, but decided to finally say something. "Wait... was she the real *tiny* one with the squeaky voice?"

Infuriated that her family took such little interest in her life that they didn't even remember having met her girlfriend, Rae was near to apoplexy. "What? That was *Marc*! He's a *guy*! He just has medical issues! *Tina* was the only *woman* there that night! The one with the loud *laugh*?"

Marie and Leonardo stared blankly at one another for a moment before turning back to Rae. "*Nope*." Marie answered as she folded her arms defiantly.

"So... *what* then? You think I'm *lying*? Tina doesn't *exist* or something?" Rae fumed.

Gerald tried to defuse the situation. "Son, let's calm *down*! Why don't we move to the couch and talk about this *calmly*, alright?"

Burning with anger at Marie's response, Rae stared daggers at her. "*Fine*! But I'm just going to say this *first*! Tina and I *are* getting married next June! We don't *care* if it upstages your wedding! We weren't *considering* that when we set the date, and we shouldn't *have* to, *should* we? We don't need *anyone's* permission, least of all *yours* Marie! We're both *adults* and we *love* each other! That's *enough*!"

Sitting on the couch, Leonardo started it. "I just want to say *this*, Raymond. You're an *idiot*! You propose to a girl you've been dating for what... six weeks? *Hey*! I *get* it! I thought *I* was gonna marry the first girl *I* loved, but we broke up after like... a *week*! Don't be an *idiot*!"

"*First* of all, Tina *isn't* the first girl I've loved!" Rae spat back. "*Secondly*, your experiences are *meaningless* to mine! I'm not *you* and Tina's not *her*! She's also a *woman*... not a *girl*!"

The conversation went round several times that way before Rae finally got fed up and started packing a bag. Marie tried to physically prevent Rae from leaving by standing in her doorway, with Leonardo telling Rae if she

touched Marie to try and move her out of the way that he'd lay Rae out. Meanwhile, Gerald just sat back and did nothing to stop them. When Rae finally threatened to call the police that she was being held against her will, Marie relented and Rae left. She ended up sleeping at Tina's house that night on their couch, Chris and Val happy to let her stay.

Weeks passed with things strained between Rae and her family. While she was ostensibly still living in her father's home, she was unwilling to listen to their concerns. Rae felt Marie was prejudiced against Tina just because of her sister's desire to get married *first*, as though Rae marrying before her was an affront to her place as 'favorite daughter' and that Rae was somehow 'breaking the rules' by not having to wait.

Then one Saturday a week before Halloween, after Tina and Rae had been dating for three months, Rae was invited over to Kathy O'Reilly's apartment as she was one of Tina's closest friends. She, Tina and Kris Warren, Rae's almost-girlfriend Kymberly's older sister, were all good friends, and Rae hung out with them often as she and Tina grew closer. Jack was also there as he had been hanging around Kathy a lot and seemed interested in her. Meanwhile Tom, her youngest employee, had been dating Kathy's younger sister Sarah... all three couples ending up there as a sort of impromptu party to celebrate Kris getting engaged to *her* boyfriend, Bill.

As the afternoon progressed, Rae noticed Tina seemed sad and distant. Not wanting to press the matter, Rae just let her be as Tina talked a lot in secret with Kathy and Kris, while she hung out with Jack, Tom, and Bill. She knew *something* was wrong, but she waited for Tina to be ready to talk about it. Finally, just before everyone was about to head home, Tina took Rae into Kathy's bedroom for some privacy.

"*Ray?*" Tina began as she sat next to her on Kathy's bed. "I'm *sorry*, but... I... see... you know I dated a lot before I *met* you, right?" Seeing Rae nod, Tina sighed before she continued. "Well... there was this *one* guy, Oscar, and I *really* liked him. He went away, and well... now he's *back* and... um..."

he wants *me* back." Pulling the ring off her finger, she placed it in Rae's lifeless hand. "I'm *really* sorry, Ray! *Believe* me! I... I just can't *help* how I feel! *Forgive* me?"

Rae was cold. Unable to process her feelings, she simply shut down. She didn't even realize that Tina gave her back the ring. Her thousand-yard stare was back, and she was once more just a shell, an empty vessel that lived and breathed but had no life in her. She imagined the litany of 'I told you so's that her sister and brother-in-law would dump on her, how happy Marie would be at Rae's pain, simply so she was once more going to be the 'special daughter' and get *her* wedding *first*. Rae knew then that she was destined to die alone, unloved, and unknown. She didn't even know when Tina left, finally being led to her car by Jack, who just hugged her and was there for her. Rae didn't go home that night. She slept in her car rather than have to face Marie's joy at her pain.

Rae had learned her lesson. She would *forever* be alone, and to think she could beat her fate was to invite humiliation, pain, heartache, and misery.

Chapter 22 - New Hopes and New Problems

Rae drifted for a time after Tina broke off their engagement. All she did was eat, sleep, and work. Her friends tried to console her, but there seemed to be no reaching the person buried under the pain. Even Tina's friends, Kris and Kathy, sided with Rae; all but shunning Tina for breaking the woman's heart the way she did, but it didn't seem to matter to Rae. When Jack and Kathy spent hours with Rae trying to cheer her up, to make her see that life had not ended with her ruined plans and broken heart, their efforts fell on deaf ears. Rae was inconsolable. For Rae, life *was* over.

Since Jack was busy with work most nights, Kathy spent time with Rae as she tried to drag the hidden girl's feelings out into the open. Eventually, after weeks of effort, Kathy wore down Rae's defenses and the dam broke. Spending a weekend day and night crying her pain out at Kathy's place, the eighteen-year-old stayed with her, supported her, and listened. Rae sobbed openly like the brokenhearted woman she was, not even *caring* that she was doing so in front of someone else. They'd bonded like best girlfriends that day, and Kathy didn't even seem to mind.

Marie took the news with feigned sorrow at her sister's loss, but Rae couldn't help but see the spark of superiority in her sister's eyes. She didn't *say* anything, but Rae didn't *need* her to. She knew Marie too well, and the words came to her loud and clear. *There! Just try and remember your place from now on, Raymond! I'm the beautiful and loved daughter, and you're just my lowly brother! Don't ever try to show me up again!* She could never know if Marie really felt that way, but she'd acted that way enough through their lives that to Rae, it *was* truth.

As the date for Kris's wedding approached, her fiancé Bill asked Rae to be his best man, mostly because she was already a friend of the Warren family and Bill had already been turned down by all the other guys he knew. Agreeing absently, Rae wrote a Best Man's speech using Bible quotes, and tied them together with poetic words of hope and promise she didn't feel.

The shattered remains of her heart were hidden from view, but all her friends knew they were there. Since Jack couldn't go to the wedding due to work, Rae and Kathy ended up going to the wedding together. Not as a couple, just as good friends.

The day of the wedding turned out to be a nice one for late November in Northern Nevada. Rae stood with Bill, while Kathy stood with Kris. Marcy wasn't there with Bruce, but Rae had suspected she *wouldn't* be after their one evening of reminiscing. After the ceremony, Rae gave her speech, which was well received, but drained her to force the words out of her mouth. Sitting down next to Kathy, she sighed exhaustedly.

"Next time, *you* be the Best Man and *I'll* be the Maid of Honor!" Rae joked to Kathy. "I don't think I could *do* that again!"

"I don't know that it'll come up anytime *soon*, Raymond." she pointed out. "*Still*, you did a good *job* with it."

"*Thanks*. You've been *great*! Putting up with my *moodiness*, listening when I need to *vent*. Why can't I find someone like *you*, only who loves me *back*? Then you wouldn't have to be *bothered*!"

"I take *offense* to that, Raymond!" she grouched. "You're my *friend*, and friends are *there* for each other! I'll *always* be there for you!"

"*Sorry*." Rae sheepishly apologized. "My experience has been that friends are there, until it gets *hard* and then they *disappear*. Not *your* fault. Mine I guess for picking bad *friends* and not being a very good one *myself*."

"You're a *great* friend, Raymond! Jack *agrees*! If that's how your *old* friends treated you, they didn't *deserve* you!"

"Beggars can't be *choosers*." Rae pointed out as she idly swirled her waterglass. "They were who I could *get* at the time. Really, they were my

first *real* friends and I didn't even have *them* until I was *seventeen*. I don't know what you, Jack, or Tom *see* in me, but I'm *grateful* for it."

"Raymond... can I just call you *Ray*? Raymond sounds so *stuffy*!"

"I *am* *stuffy*!" Rae said, trying to be funny and serious at the same time. "I'm even tempered, unassuming, controlled, collected, and all the things I *didn't* used to be when I was a kid. I grew up fast and, now at twenty-three, I'm already a *stuffy* old *curmudgeon* who wears a tie to work, listens to Bing Crosby, Benny Goodman, and Glen Miller, and if I *had* a lawn I'd be yelling at the neighbor kids to get *off* it!"

Laughing at Rae's self-depreciating assessment of herself, Kathy shook her head. "*No*, you're someone who's *decent* and *caring*! So you're a hard worker who looks ahead and plans for the *future*! How *terrible*! I know a *lot* of women who'd like a guy like that, who can *appreciate* the stability and security someone like *you* can offer."

"*Really*?" Rae asked skeptically. "OK then, *name* one! Just *one* woman who values those things above passion the way *I* do who can *love* me! There's a *reason* nice guys finish *last* Kathy. It's because most women don't *want* safe, secure, dependable, and hard-working. They want *fire*! *Passion*! *Romance*! *Intrigue*! Just look at the romance novel industry! It's all about sexy *pirates* who abduct the maiden from the cold arms of the prince, who has *everything* to give her, but she doesn't *want* it. She wants *excitement*, *danger*, and *passion*! And they sell tens of *millions* of copies every *year*! So, *can* you? Can you name *one* woman our age who, like *me*, values things like faith, chastity, security, and good old fashioned hard work above a good time?"

Hearing her tirade, Kathy was almost shocked. It was the most Rae had spoken spontaneously since Tina had broken her heart. Blinking back the surprise, she nodded her head. "Yes! I *can*, Raymond! *Me*! I'm a virgin like you, and *proud* of it! I work my *butt* off at the music store! I *save*, I think to my *future*, I go to *Shabbat* every Friday night... so... yeah! *Me*!" Slightly

miffed at Rae's pessimism, Kathy pointed out the flaws in her argument. "Look, *I* read those stupid, sappy romance novels *too!* But that's not what I want from a *real* relationship! I want a *rock...* someone I can *depend* on when things get *rough!* So there you go!"

Rae looked at Kathy seriously for the first time. In many ways, Kathy was everything Rae wanted in a woman. She was serious, faithful, fun, steady, reliable, honest, smart, and on top of all that... *attractive.* Most men found her large size a turn-off, but Rae had always been attracted to larger girls and women. With the sole exception of Marcy, who she later realized she felt *envy* towards more than attraction, all of Rae's serious loves had been above average in size. Harmony, Julia, Tina... *all* of them were, if not *heavy,* certainly weren't *thin.* Not that she'd have declined if a skinny girl had ever *liked* her, but preferences are what they are. "*Alright. Fair point,* but I had a caveat at the beginning if you recall. I asked if you knew of any women like that, *who can love me.*"

Realizing Rae did have a point, Kathy thought for a moment if there were any women like herself that were available and looking, and found she was coming up blank. "No, I guess I *don't.* I mean, other than *me,* I suppose."

"Too bad you're *taken.*" Rae sighed as she sipped her water.

"I'm not *taken,* Ray!" Kathy pointed out. "Jack and I haven't even gone on a *date* yet. I'm *supposed* to go with him to a military ball for the Army Guard next month. That's supposed to be our first date."

"Still, I would say that you don't count then on that measure, so my point *stands.* All the women who want what I have to offer are *taken,* for obvious *reasons.* I can't blame Jack for wanting to date you. He obviously has good *taste!*"

Blushing at the compliment, Kathy looked at her lap. "*Thanks!* You know, if I *wasn't* seeing Jack, I'd *seriously* go after you! Tina was an *idiot* to

throw you over for *Oscar*! He's a total *bum*! She *deserves* him and *you* deserve *way* better than *her*!"

Smiling at her returned compliment, Rae shrugged. "*Thanks*, but little comfort when all I have to come home to is a cat that barks at birds!"

"Your cat *barks*?" she inquired.

Telling the story of how she got her cat, and how he ended up thinking he was a dog, Rae found herself laughing for the first time in over a month. She also noticed that she'd let her guard down and was talking animatedly without having to parse her words to make sure they were masculine enough. She was at ease, herself, and enjoying Kathy's company, but as soon as she realized it she was flooded with guilt. She'd already 'stolen' one woman from Jack; a man she respected, admired, and loved like a brother. *I just can't do that again! Not to Jack! Not to anyone! I would never want to put anyone through what Tina put me through! I'd rather die alone than become someone like her!*

What Rae failed to think about though was that the decision wasn't really hers to *make*. It was *Kathy's*. Jack was a *fine* man, but he had his faults like everyone. In *his* case, it was a lack of looking out for himself. Jack was terrible with his finances, and perpetually one paycheck away from eviction, because he was overly generous in loaning money to friends who never paid him back. While his generosity was admirable, it was at the expense of his own security. Several times Rae had to front Jack gas money because he'd given all of his to Jay or Spencer. In Kathy's opinion, that made him too unreliable to be the dependable person she really wanted... someone like *Rae*.

By the time of the military ball, Kathy had already made up her mind, and was starting to spend more time with Rae than Jack, even when Jack *was* available. When Kathy asked Jack if Rae could come *with* them to the dance, Jack knew the handwriting was on the wall. He graciously stepped

aside, and was honestly happy that Rae could find someone after she'd been hurt so badly. In fact, Jack felt bad that Rae had dated Tina in his place, sparing Jack from the torment Rae'd had to endure when the woman's true colors had shown themselves.

Months passed, and Rae spent nearly all her free time with Kathy. Getting to know the young Jewish woman's parents, Rae found them an odd pair. Though they'd been divorced for years, her mother Joy still had family dinners with her ex-husband Paul and their daughters as though nothing had changed, other than the fact that she slept in another apartment. What Rae found oddest of all though was when, in addition to *Hanukkah*, they celebrated *Christmas*... not as a *religious* holiday, but as a strictly *American* holiday. To Rae the idea seemed unthinkable.

Rae's faith had been shaken several times in her life, but she continued to hold firm to her belief in salvation through Christ forgiving her the sin of being a woman in a man's body. When Kathy invited Rae to attend *Shabbat* with her, she agreed, even though she had no intention of giving up her faith, no matter how much both seemed to damn her. Kathy's rabbi was an understanding woman, and told Rae that she respected Rae's willingness to attend Shabbat and celebrate Hanukkah to honor *Kathy's* faith, while still holding true to her *own*.

The rabbi gave Rae reading material, things that were normally given to Jewish kids to help them learn the rituals of faith, which helped her to participate in Shabbat services and other Jewish traditions and prayers more easily since they were all conducted in Hebrew. She studied the Hebrew prayers for *months*, learning all she could about the language, history, and most importantly to her, how it related to her own Christian faith.

She'd started going to a non-denominational church near her after she turned nineteen, and enjoyed connecting with those of her faith. She eventually was baptized into the congregation officially, but her work schedule as a manager began to interfere with her church services, and she

had to stop going or quit her job. So she enjoyed Shabbat services with Kathy and being able to attend a religious group once again, even if their faith was not exactly the same. *Jesus is the Son of the God of Abraham, Moses, and the prophets.* she reasoned. *Even if the prayers aren't the same, I'm still praying to the same God, I just also pray to His Son. We're not all that different from one another, after all.*

When her twenty-fourth birthday came, Rae and Kathy decided they would rent an apartment and move in together. It was time for Rae to move out on her own and establish a home for the family she was sure she would soon be starting with the woman she'd fallen in love with. They were still chaste, and intended to *remain* so until they were married, but *everyone*, including her *family*, thought they were sleeping together. Rae didn't care. They *were* sleeping together, but to *sleep*, not to have *sex*. *She* knew the truth, and so did Kathy, so that's all that mattered.

Days before Rae moved out, life once more sent her in a new direction when the company she worked for closed her location without warning. One morning she just showed up to open, and there was a tractor-trailer parked to empty out the store-front. They expected Rae to break her back for a normal day's pay and no severance pay. Instead, she collected her things, told her supervisor just what he could do with his last day of pay and drove home.

She would only be unemployed for six weeks, but the free time let her help Kathy get everything moved instead of Kathy moving everything mostly by herself as planned. Since Kathy had been bumped down to a part-time position, it'd been decided that *she* would move most of their things. So being laid-off had been a blessing in disguise, in more ways than Rae could have ever imagined.

After they'd moved in together, Rae had a lot of free time until the next training class started at her new job working sales in a call center. It was barely above minimum wage and was a sharp pay cut for her, but it was

what she could get on short notice and had potential for decent bonus pay if she made her quotas. In the mean time, she had her ample savings and it gave her a chance to pick up her Hebrew studies and also a chance to add study of something *else* she'd always wanted to learn... Ancient Greek.

When Rae had begun learning Hebrew, and was then able to read some Old Testament passages in the original tongue, she started noticing that certain nuance was lost in the translations of them to English. Rae taught herself Latin when she was still in High School just as a hobby, and enjoyed being able to read ancient works in the original texts, especially biblical texts, but a lot of the originals were in Greek and Hebrew. Learning all three would let her make new connections to the original writers of the Old and New Testaments, the Hebrew prophets and the Apostles of Christ, and she liked that idea.

It was also during her time between jobs that Rae and Kathy had their first real fight and Rae learned about Kathy's viscous temper.

Rae had told Kathy about her feminine nature when they started seriously dating. She had also made it clear to Kathy that it was in her *past* and that she was dedicated to *keeping* it there. Kathy had accepted it and said that she loved Rae all the more for telling her about it, able to see how much it disturbed the woman's faith. The fight began when they were unpacking. Rae was in the kitchen putting things away when Kathy came out of their bedroom angry.

"*Raymond!*" Kathy growled.

Standing up slowly from one of the cupboards, Rae could tell she was mad, but didn't have a clue what about. "Yes, love?"

"Don't you 'yes love' *me!*" she snapped. "You mind telling me what's in this *box?*" She held up a small cube-shaped box about a foot and a half on each side.

Not recognizing the box at first, Rae shrugged. "No *idea*. I think it's one of the boxes I had down in the crawlspace beneath my room. I kept a *lot* of junk under there from when I was..." Suddenly, Rae remembered the box and what she'd put in it. "*Oh! Oh, Kathy!* I had *no idea* I still had any of... my... um..."

"Women's *clothes*?" Kathy shouted. "*Yeah!* I *thought* you said it was all in your *past!*"

"It *is!*" Rae shouted back, angry that Kathy wouldn't even give her a chance to explain. "I *thought* I got *rid* of that box *years* ago! You've *known* this was a part of me for over six *months!*"

"Well, *knowing* and *seeing* are two different *things*, Raymond!" she barked as she threw the box to the floor. "How could you bring those... *things* into our *home?*"

"*Hey!* I didn't even know they were *there!*" Rae defended herself. "*You're* the one that insisted on getting all the boxes out from under *Dad's* house! I haven't even *seen* that box in nearly five *years!*"

"*Likely story!*" Kathy fumed around the living room looking like a caged tiger. "Why don't you tell me the *truth*, Raymond! You *still* want to be a girl! *Don't* you!"

"*No!*" Rae insisted. "It's a *sin!* I *can't* be a woman! Most *importantly* because I couldn't marry *you!*" They'd talked about marriage a few times, deciding that, while they *did* want to get married, they were going to wait until Marie's wedding, Rae would propose at the reception with a twenty-two month engagement, and they'd get married three years after they had first met.

"You sure you don't wanna marry *Jack* instead?" Kathy spat.

Rae fumed at the idea. "Oh... *nice* Kathy! Why don't you just call me a *fag* like the kids in *school* did, or the way *Marie* used to and get it *over* with! Maybe it's *you* that doesn't want to marry *me* and this is just the convenient *excuse* to get *out* of it!"

Kathy stormed around the breakfast bar and right up to Rae. Reaching her hand back, she slapped Rae hard enough to knock her to the floor. "How *dare* you try and put this on *me*! *I'm* not the one that thinks he's a *girl*!"

Shocked at the violence of her fury, Rae was instantly back in the seventh grade getting kicked in the face by Blake. Tears welled up in her eyes faster than she could stop the flood of terror invading her. "*Please* don't hit me anymore!" she cried openly as she cowered on the floor.

As suddenly as it begun, the fight ended and Kathy crouched down next to her. "Oh, *Raymond*! I'm *so* sorry! I didn't *mean*..." When she reached out to comfort the terrified woman, Rae flinched in fear of her, making Kathy feel even *worse*. "Raymond, *please*. I... I'm *sorry*! *Please* forgive me!"

Hearing the soothing voice, Rae started coming out of her terror-induced flashback. Like turning off a switch, Rae forced the sobbing to stop by shoving her feelings down deep inside her once more. It was the only thing she could do to stop the fear and hurt from affecting her, to just feel *nothing* again and become an empty shell until she reasoned it was safe again. Standing up slowly, Rae grabbed a tissue from the box on the counter. "Of *course* I forgive you." she said evenly. "I'm sorry I reacted so emotionally. I'll try not to let it happen again. I know you don't want some weeping woman as a husband. You want a *man*."

Kathy saw the change in Rae's behavior, the cold and unfeeling way in which she spoke, and almost backed away. The only reason she didn't was guilt at having lashed out and attacking her. "I... I'm sorry I accused you of still pretending to be... um..."

"It's fine." Rae stated flatly. "Given the evidence, it was an understandable conclusion. You can throw the box away if you wish."

Kathy was still perplexed by the change in Rae's demeanor. Unsure what to do, she shook her head. "N...no. It's *fine*. I guess... maybe... I should learn to *understand* that part of you a little better. You don't *talk* about it... *ever*."

Walking over to sit at the kitchen table, Rae blinked slowly. "It's not something I like very much about myself. It's something I've been praying for God to take away from me for most of my life. It's brought me nothing but misery, pain, and loneliness."

Sitting next to her, Kathy smiled tenderly and took Rae's hand. When Rae didn't squeeze it the way she always did, Kathy withdrew once more. "You're still *mad* at me."

"No, but I am sort of 'cut off' at the moment." Rae explained vacantly. "It's a coping mechanism I developed years ago. Right now I'm just sort of cut off from my feelings, is all. It'll pass once my emotions are more under control. I'm sorry if it's disconcerting to you. If it helps, it's not *you*, it's *me*. It's how I deal with too much, *feeling*." She neglected to mention that it was how she dealt with too much of her *feminine* emotions, but felt given the circumstances that it was better left unsaid.

Leaving Rae alone for a while, Kathy went back into the bedroom to resume unpacking while Rae collected herself and resumed putting things away in the kitchen. By the time they were ready to sit and relax a while, Rae had managed to lower her defenses and let herself feel again. She hated that to do so she needed to hide in the bathroom and cry it out silently, but it let the two of them resume a more normal level of interaction sooner. As they sat on the couch and relaxed together, Kathy cuddled up to Rae.

"*Raymond*? I really *am* sorry I reacted so badly to finding that box." she offered as apology. Feeling Rae tense up at the mention of it, Kathy tried to

undo some of the damage she'd caused. "I should have *believed* you when you said you didn't know what it *was*."

"It's *understandable*, love." Rae sighed. "It must have been quite a *shock*!"

"Just a *little*!" she joked. After laughing together for a moment, Kathy turned to her and looked Rae in the eyes. "I... I was *serious* when I said that maybe I should learn more about that side of you." Seeing Rae about to object, Kathy held up her hand. "I *know* it bothers you. That's why I think I should learn more *about* it. It's part of who you *were*, and I want to know *all* of you, even the parts you *don't* like."

Resignedly, Rae nodded in agreement. "*Alright*. What do you wanna *know*?"

"*Everything*." Kathy demanded.

Taking a moment to think, Rae started from her earliest memories of waiting for a parade in Disneyland during the Bicentennial and ending with her getting rid of all her female clothes and things when she turned nineteen and was baptized. "Well, at least I *thought* I got rid of them all!" she finished. "That box went along with another larger box that had clothes in it. I dropped the big one off at the thrift store, but I forgot all about the *small* one."

Getting up, Kathy returned to the bedroom for a moment before coming out carrying the box and placing it on the coffee table. "*Show* me?"

Rae hesitantly leaned forward and opened the box, smiling as she saw the first thing inside and remembered everything there. Reaching in, she withdrew a small pink straw hat. "I... um... I *found* this in a ditch just south of the airport walking home from school once. I passed it every day for a *week* before I went in after it."

Setting it aside, Rae continued into the box and pulled out a mid-length burgundy skirt. "*Oh*... um... I... I bought this skirt from Penny's when I was

fourteen! It should have been in the box with the other clothes, but... um... it got missed and by the time I found it, getting to the big box was too hard, so I just put it in *here*."

Kathy just sat and listened as Rae went through the box of memories. Going for the next item, she pulled out the necklace she'd given Marie. "I gave this to Marie for Christmas when I was thirteen. I bought it using money I earned working during lunch at school, but never saw her wear it. When we moved to the house my dad and her live in now, she went through her things and got rid of stuff she didn't want anymore. When I was taking it to the thrift store to donate it for her, I found this necklace in with the things she wanted to give away. So, I... I took it *back*."

"You took it *back*?" Kathy asked. "*Why*?"

Rae sighed and looked at the golden heart with the ruby set in the middle as it dangled from its chain. "I... I *bought* this for her because *I* liked it, but because it was *Christmas*, I wanted *her* to have it. I... I guess she just didn't *care* for it. It's too *girly* for her."

"But it *wasn't* too girly for *you*?" she asked with a raised eyebrow.

Shaking her head, Rae put the necklace down. "*No*. I... If I'd been a *normal* girl, I would have been one of those girls that always wore dresses. You *know*? Those girls that always wore pink or white, or floral prints? The ones that always painted their *nails*, and did fancy things with their *hair*? *You* know! *Girly* girls!" Rae caught herself for a moment talking in her natural voice, now tainted by years of testosterone poisoning, and emoting with her whole body. Clearing her throat, she turned serious and looked down. "But *anyway*..."

They continued to go through the box one item at a time, while Rae told how she'd gotten it, why, and what it meant to her. At the bottom was a nightgown, bra, and panty set. "Oh... this um... last thing... or last *things*, I

should say... these were the last feminine things I ever bought. I got them while I was in choir in High School. I was seventeen and... well... it was a weird time for me."

Telling her the story of Kate, Lisa, Melanie, Jason, Julia, Eric, and Robbie, Rae stumbled through her explanation. "I... I was trying to figure out if I really was supposed to be a *girl* or not. I... I bought these and then... I... I never *wore* them. About that time I got kicked out of school and... well... I never dressed like a girl *again*. I sometimes think those things happened to me because God was *punishing* me for being *weak*."

Having been almost entirely silent while Rae went through the box of things, Kathy looked at the assembled history of Rae's femininity sitting on the coffee table. "For what it's *worth*, I don't think God was punishing you, Raymond. I think it was just that Eric guy being an *asshole* and your so-called *friends* being *cowards*. Also, I don't think dressing like a woman is a *sin*, not in *Judaism*, anyway."

"It *is*!" Rae exclaimed. "Deuteronomy twenty-two, five. '*Women are not to wear men's clothing, and men are not to wear women's clothing; the Lord your God hates people who do such things.*' In the Torah, it's the Devarim... the second law. *Believe* me, I know it by *heart*."

Unsure of Rae's accuracy, but deciding to take her word for it, Kathy nodded and sighed. "I didn't *know* that." Sitting back, she looked lost in thought for a while.

Rae looked longingly at the unworn nightgown and other items collected there. *Put out the eye that leads you to sin*. Picking each one back up and returning it to the box, Rae closed it. "I... I'll take this down to the thrift store tomorrow and donate it like I should have a long *time* ago."

Grabbing Rae's hand as she stood to take the box to the door, Kathy made her sit back down. "Not *yet*, OK? I... I want to *think* about all this."

Sighing, Kathy crossed her arms and looked away. "See, I called and talked to *Gwen* after... um... after our fight. *She* said I was being close-minded about this whole thing. That I needed to know *all* about you before we even *think* of getting married. I... I think she's *right*."

Rae had only met Gwen Reynolds once briefly as she waited for Kathy to finish work one evening. The two had been friends since High School and, while Rae didn't really know much about her, believed she was a good influence on Kathy. "I'm an open *book* to you, love." Rae smiled at her sweetly. "If you *want*, I'll put the box in the back of the closet for now. We can talk about it *later*, *OK?*"

Seeing Kathy nod, Rae removed the box to the other room, Rachel still screaming in her ear for daring try to get rid of that last of *her* things.

Chapter 23 - Costumes

The next month Rae began her new job and took Kathy, this time as her *date*, to Marie's wedding. As they'd planned, Rae proposed to Kathy officially there in front of her entire family. With the long engagement, having dated for more than nine months first, and having spent a lot of time together with her family and Kathy getting to know each other, the reception of their engagement was much more positive.

Rae couldn't help but feel though that the *real* reason was because Marie's wedding was now done, thus she was *allowed* to get married, *too*. Years of feeling like a second-class daughter, and the wound of Marie's comment never having fully healed, exacerbated by the fact that Marie had not, and never would, *apologize* for it, made Rae pessimistic. It didn't help that Marie had continued to belittle Rae with snide comments about the broken engagement, one less than a minute after the accepted proposal.

Coming up to congratulate the two, Marie insisted on seeing the ring. Looking over at Rae, the first thing she said was cruel and spiteful.

"*Good!* I just wanted to check that it wasn't the same ring you gave *Tina!*"

Feeling the pain of her broken heart all over again, and forced to relive the most humiliating and painful experience of her adult life, Rae's smile melted in a flash. "I wouldn't *do* that, Marie! Why would you even *think* I *would*? Why would you even *mention* that right now?"

"Because you're *you!*" she insulted Rae with a smile. "You're just not very *good* at things like this, Raymond... at knowing a *woman's* heart. I was just looking *out* for you, *that's* all!"

As Marie walked with Leonardo back to the head table, Kathy hugged Rae. "Don't *listen* to her, Raymond. You know *my* heart." Leaning in to kiss her cheek, she hesitantly added in a whisper, "...and your *own*."

Within the first ninety days at her new job, Rae had managed to max out her bonus schedule as she worked the phones as though she were born to it. She also made new friends. Not surprisingly, she befriended quite a few of the women in the center, none of the men, and quickly found several who became close enough to hang out with and talk to during breaks. When a group of three of them invited Rae and Kathy to go out clubbing with them on Halloween night, Rae had a thought that she never would have believed she would seriously consider in her life. Going home that evening, she sat down with Kathy and talked to her about it.

"Love?" she began. "Were you *serious* when you said you wanted to know my... um... *feminine* side... better? To actually *see* it?"

Nervously, Kathy looked to the floor. "Yeah, I *guess* so. *Why?*"

With a smirk on her face, Rae almost giggled as she made the suggestion. "Thi Dao, Kristin, and Linda from work invited us to go out with them for Halloween. I got a big bonus this month, so we can afford to have some fun!"

"OK." Kathy said curiously. "So, what does *one* have to do with the *other?*"

Rae blushed at even thinking the idea, let alone saying it out loud. "So, Halloween is supposed to be about dressing up like things you *aren't*, right? Like witches, monsters, superheroes, princesses, fairies, things like *that*, right?" Pausing as Kathy nodded, she took a breath before saying her idea. "Well... I... I always *wanted* to dress in a *girl's* costume for Halloween. When I was *young*, it was because I figured it would be the only way I could dress like *myself*, but *now*... well... I have an idea that might kill two birds with one stone. Sort of a way to do *something* like that, but *still* not be dressing like *myself*, so it's still just a *costume*, not just me in a *dress*."

Rolling her eyes as Rae went on and on without actually saying what she had in mind, Kathy started to lose patience. "So what's this *idea?*"

"What would you think about me dressing up like... a *hooker*?" Rae stammered out finally.

Kathy's eyes widened as she looked at Rae as though she'd gone mad. "A *what*?"

"A *hooker*! A *prostitute*! It's like the polar *opposite* of me! *Me*, the twenty-four-year-old *virgin*, dressing like a *hooker*! Do you think I could pull it off? I mean... *seriously*?"

Kathy looked Rae over as if scrutinizing her. Rae was tall and thin, with just enough of a hint of a thin waist to be noticeable. "I don't *know*..."

"Oh, come *on*!" Rae gleamed. "You've been *saying* that you need to *see* this part of me. Actually *see* me just be myself? *This* way I can *do* that, and it's all just in *fun*, right? Look, I *know* things have been tight financially, lately. We have a *lot* less money than we *thought* we'd have when we moved out, but I've been working *hard*, and I think we really *should* go out and have a *little* fun! So I guess *first* of all, do you wanna go out with the girls from work? You can bring *Gwen* and have *any* costume you *want*!"

Smiling and nodding, Kathy capitulated on that point. "*Alright*! We can do *that*! But you dressing up like a *hooker*?"

"Think about *this*." Rae argued. "They're having a costume contest at work. First prize is fifty *bucks*! If I *do* this, and do it *right*, and make it *believable*, I could win and we get the night out *paid* for!" Making a final pitch, Rae went for broke. "Tell you *what*. You and *Gwen* take me shopping for a costume. The whole *deal*... shoes, hair, dress, fake nails, the *works*! I try them on the week before and if *you* don't think I can win, we scrap the whole *thing*, return *everything*, and I go as whatever *you* pick. *Deal*?"

Kathy wasn't sure, but *Gwen* had been nagging her more and more lately to get Rae to open up to her, and she'd made an intriguing argument. "*Alright*!"

It's a *deal!* But *I* get final say! If *I* don't think it's convincing, we take it *all* back and *you* go as a *cowboy* with *me* as your *cowgirl!* *Deal?*"

Rae held out her hand and they shook on it, then kissed on it. She was going to dress up as a woman for Halloween. Not just *any* woman though... of all things, the chaste Christian was going to dress up as a hooker. As promised, the week before Halloween, after Rae got her bonus check, Gwen and Kathy took her to a discount clothing store that was also selling Halloween gear like wigs, false nails, and other things.

Gwen found the dress, and it nearly made Rae back out of the deal and take the cowboy option. It was a little black dress with a matching lace half-jacket. It *was* cute, but it would only come down to Rae's upper thigh and would look *extremely* slutty on her. Swallowing her modesty, she went along with it, as the two other ladies bought a frizzy brown wig, black feather boa, fishnet stockings, and three-inch black heels in addition to the necessary undergarments.

Once they were home, Rae showered and shaved her entire body below the eyebrows. Actually happy to be rid of her body hair for a while, she came out into the bedroom and found the outfit laid out on the bed. Nervous, as she hadn't tried to dress like a girl since she was a teen, and never like a *woman*, she took her time getting ready. Several times she was interrupted by a knock on the door to see if she needed any help, followed by a series of giggles from the two waiting women.

When at last Rae adjusted the wig into place and shifted the bra and falsies to sit right, all without once looking in the mirror, she took a breath and went over to the bedroom door. "OK. I'm *ready*." she said shakily.

When Kathy came into the room and saw Rachel standing there looking shy and modest, tugging on the hem of the skirt to try and show a little less leg, she almost fainted. When Gwen found the dress, Kathy thought it would make Rae balk and admit defeat. There was no *way* that her fiancé

could pull off looking like a woman in a dress *that* revealing. Instead what she saw was no man *at all*. The person standing there expectantly looking at her was all *woman...* and a *hot* one at *that*.

"*Well?*" Rae gulped. "W...what do you *think?*"

Gwen was amazed at the change. "My *God*, Raymond! Or should I say, *Rachel!* You look *smokin'!* You aren't even wearing *makeup*, yet!"

Blushing, Rae fidgeted with her fingers and looked at the floor. "You... you think it will *work*, then?"

"Well, you've got the *look...*" Gwen noted. "But can you act the *part?*"

Rae closed her eyes and let out a breath. Basic drama had been a part of Advanced Chorus, so she knew the essentials of acting, and her years of playing role-playing games had made her adept at *becoming* a different person. Terrified, she dropped all her guards and let the first people in seven years see the real *her*. Then, taking the *role* she was supposed to be playing, Rachel looked up, smiled widely, cocked her left hip sideways, put a hand on her hip, and raised her chin high. "Like *this?*" she said in her natural voice, shifting up half an octave and sounding breathy.

The two ladies stood amazed as Rachel swung her hips from side to side in and did a quick catwalk between them, out into the living room, turned on the balls of her feet, and struck a brief pose before returning the same way. Once she was by the bed again, with her back to them, she put one hand back on her hip and cocked it to the side with the opposite leg pointing outward and glancing over her shoulder seductively. "How's *that?*" Rachel purred.

Gwen, nudging Kathy who stood speechless, grinned. "*Kathy?* I don't wanna sound *sexist* or anything, but can I *borrow* her?" Laughing at her own line that she'd stolen from a movie, it had the effect she desired as it broke Kathy out of her stunned silence.

"I... what? *Gwen!* That's just *so* wrong it's not *even* funny!" Kathy barked while repressing a giggle. Walking around Rachel slowly, she could hardly believe it was the same person, other than the face being the same. "How did you *do* that?"

"Do *what?*" Rachel asked as she lowered herself gracefully onto the side of the bed, crossing her legs and leaning on one arm. "*Walk* like that? It's *easy!* You just step one foot slightly inside the step of the other and swing your hip out slightly..."

"*No!*" Kathy interrupted her. "*That!* You're acting *totally* different! You're acting like..." She paused, unable to actually say the words.

"A *woman?*" Rachel finished batting her eyes as Kathy's voice trailed off. Turning self-conscious, she looked away. "I have to try *not* to act like that all the *time.*"

Gwen walked over and stood next to Kathy. "*Hey!* It's *alright*, Kath. It's no big *deal*, really. She's just *different* from other..." Catching herself referring to Rachel in the feminine, she stopped and changed the subject. "*Anyway*, you gotta *admit*, it's pretty darn *convincing!*"

Nodding, Kathy had to agree. "You're *right!* I *lose!* I guess cowboy and cowgirl is *out!* Now I'll have to think of a different costume for *me!*"

While Gwen and Kathy discussed their respective costumes, Rachel sat and listened, making comments a few times when she had something to add to the costume ideas. Eventually, Rachel excused herself and went into the bathroom to change back into her normal clothes and resume her Raymond persona. Coming back out a few minutes later, Rae was surprised by Gwen's reaction.

"*Hey!* Why'd you *change?*"

Rae raised an eyebrow. "The *reason* for me to get dressed up was to prove I *could* do it and look *convincing*. We already *established* that, so..."

"You were *also* supposed to spend some time with *Kathy* like that, so she can get to know the real *you!*" Gwen pointed out.

"But that costume isn't *me*." Rae countered. "It's just a *costume*. I would *never* wear something like that. *Way* too short and slutty!"

"*OK!* So then put something on you *would* wear and let's have *dinner!*" Gwen pushed. Looking at Kathy, she tilted her head and put a hand on her shoulder. "You *gotta* admit, Rachel makes a *heck* of a sexy woman! If she wasn't already *yours*, I wouldn't kick her out of bed for eating crackers!"

Rae shrugged. "I don't *have* anything else to change *into*, other than one burgundy skirt I was supposed to get rid of *years* ago." Her voice shifting to a natural tone, she added, "*Besides*, I'm not *that* kind of *woman!*" Getting Kathy to laugh along with Gwen, the three made dinner while they talked about costume ideas further.

Finally, Gwen couldn't stand it anymore and almost dragged Rae into the bathroom to experiment with makeup on her. Gwen wouldn't let her look in the mirror while she worked, and had Rae put the dress back on, ostensibly so she could see the finished product. Sitting patiently while Gwen chattered, giggled, and worked, finally after almost an hour she stood back after messing with Rae's natural hair. "*OK*. Turn around and *look*." she beamed.

Turning to face the bathroom mirror, Rachel felt her heart skip a beat as she saw the reflected image. Her eyes were highlighted with black liquid liner, blue eye shadow, and mascara, making them seem huge, and framed with just the right shaping of her brows. The bright pink lipstick that colored her lips was shiny and glittery, while her hair had been feathered into a cute feminine bob. "I... I'm... *pretty!*" she gulped, amazed as the beautiful young woman in the mirror mimicked her words.

"No!" Gwen corrected her. "You're *hot!*"

Halloween fell on a Friday that year, making the parties around town just a little *extra* crazy, since most people had the weekend to recover. By the time the day arrived, Rae was nervous as Kathy drove her to work; her own car having been sold to reduce costs since Kathy's got better gas mileage. When they arrived at her workplace, Rae looked over to her terrified.

"I don't know if I can really *do* this!" Rae almost cried. "Can you hang out for like five minutes after I go in, in case I get sent home for inappropriate *dress* or something?"

Nodding, she put a hand on Rae's fishnet-clad knee. "I *hate* to say it, but you look *amazing!* Gwen did a good job teaching you to do your makeup! You look *fabulous!* You'll be *fine*, but I'll *stay* a few if you *need* me to."

Leaning over to give her a kiss goodbye, Rae was crestfallen when Kathy turned away at the attempt. "*Sorry*. I... I'll see you after work." Rae noted.

Feeling guilty, Kathy grabbed Rae's hand and kissed her knuckles gallantly and smiled. "Go *get 'em, Rachel!*"

Suddenly empowered, Rachel slid out of the car and closed the door, sauntering up to the elevator doors in the vestibule on the bottom floor, the click of her heels filling the room. The only other person there was the cleaning lady who didn't speak much English. Seeing the look of disdain on the woman's face as she eyed Rachel's short dress, she smiled and said to her the same thing she did every morning. "*Buenos dias, senorita.*"

As the elevator doors closed, she saw the look on the woman's face change from scornful to shocked. "*¡Tú! Vestida como una chica?*"

Giggling slightly, she took in a breath, closed her eyes, blew it out slowly, and relaxed into herself as she ascended to the third floor. When the doors

opened, the sight of her supervisor Shawn greeted her. Looking her over with eyes like mapping radar, he finally came to look at her face as she smiled back at him.

"Good *morning*, Shawn!" she sang in her natural voice.

Finally realizing who it was that he was seeing, he shook his head and looked at her again, still not having moved out of the way of the doors so she could get out. Realizing he was staring, he stepped back and gestured for her to exit. "You're here to win the *costume* contest, *aren't* you?"

Striding confidently out of the lift, Rachel swung past him and flipped her hair. "Damn *straight!*" she quipped with a smile. Quickly cutting through the office floor, seeming to eat up yards with every swing of her hips, by the time she approached her cubical, half the agents in the center were standing at their own stations and staring with jaws dropping. Deftly dropping her purse onto her desk and gracefully lowering herself into her chair, she swung her legs under the desk and pulled in closely as people leaned around and over obstacles to continue their optical assault.

Unable to put her headset on normally due to the thick wig she wore, she simply inverted the headset and let the headband hang under her chin instead. Punching in her login code, a simple task made difficult by the long fake nails she wore, she waited while the system came up. Even as she did so, Linda, who sat in the cubical directly across from Rae's, stood and leaned over the partition.

"*Oh! My! God!*" she said, stunned to near inability to speak. "*Raymond?* Is that really *you?*"

Smiling, Rachel winked at her. "Name's *Rachel*, dear! And I'm a *workin'* girl who needs to turn a few *tricks* to keep ahead on the leader-board, so if you don't *mind?* We can talk at *break*, *K?*" Seeing the stunned woman nod and sit back down, Rachel smiled even as a call came to her station.

By the time two hours passed, Rachel had been 'casually walked by' by almost everyone in the center. She just went about her work, made four more sales, and truly relaxed for the first time in years. She knew on break that she'd have to put up a front once more, pretending that it was all just an act for Halloween and to win the contest, but she didn't *care*. Here and now she was able to be herself and '*not cause anyone to stumble*' as it said in Romans fourteen and First Corinthians eight, because this was 'just in fun', not a 'lifestyle choice'.

Hanging up her headset, Rachel stood up to go on break and noticed several of her co-workers quickly doing the same, joining them on the way to the elevator.

"Oh my *God*, Ray!" Kristin burred. "You look... I don't *know*! Just... *wow*!"

"You look *amazing*!" Thi complimented her in her noticeable Vietnamese accent. Even though she'd lived her whole life in the US, she'd still picked up the way of speaking from her parents. "You are *hot*!"

"*Thank you*!" Rachel said, blushing as they waited by the elevator door. Considering that Thi was wearing a cute cheerleader's outfit, she felt the compliment was high praise indeed. Feeling a tap on her shoulder, she turned around to see Doris, one of the older ladies who worked at the center standing behind her. She was surprised because Doris had never spoken to her before, so she could only blink a moment before asking, "*Yes?*"

Holding her full-length mink coat, she nodded at Rachel. "Turn *around*, dear." Doing as she was told, Rachel was stunned when the woman who was in her sixties, draped the enormously expensive coat over her shoulders. "It's *cold* outside! Nearly *freezing*! You *take* this! Just bring it back when you come *back*, *alright* dear?"

Turning to face her with an expression of utter disbelief, Rachel could only mutter, "OK... *Doris*! I... I *promise* I'll be careful!"

The group of ladies riding the elevator to the ground floor, they chattered about how Doris *never* let anyone even *touch* her coat, let alone *borrow* it. Making their way over to the smoking area, they chatted freely, while Rachel silently accompanied them, still speechless from the act of kindness shown by a lady she'd never really met before. *If I hadn't done this, I probably never would have!* she mused.

In truth, the cold rarely bothered Rachel. Having been raised in, and grown accustomed to, Northern Nevada's winters, she simply shrugged it off most of the time, only being uncomfortable if she got wet from the occasional rain. Still, she wasn't able to refuse the offer of the coat and smiled as she lit up her cigarette at how luxurious it felt.

"No! *No, no!*" Thi admonished her. "Do not hold your cigarette like *that!* Hold it like *this!*" she demonstrated, holding her own cigarette between her index and middle finger. "You look like a *man* smoking like that!"

Rachel blushed as the ladies around her laughed, turning the cigarette around in her hand having not even given a thought to the habit. "*Better?*" she asked softly.

"*Much!*" commented Linda. "*Honestly* Raymond, I cannot *believe* how *natural* you look like that! The way you *walk, talk, toss your hair...* how long have you been *practicing* for this?"

"A *while.*" she answered honestly. "I learned some drama in High School, and figured if I wanted to have a shot at *winning*, I needed to do it *right.*"

"Why a *hooker* though?" Linda asked as she blew smoke up and away from the others. "I mean, you *could* have just dressed like a *normal* woman and done the same *thing*, right?"

Rachel shook her head as she exhaled and enjoyed the brief relief from her aching joints. "No. See, this is like my complete *opposite*. Not just a

woman... but a *hooker*! *Me*! The shy, reserved, conservative, Christian, *virgin*! You *saw* how everyone reacted! I think I have a good *shot*!"

"You are *virgin*?" Thi more stated than asked. "I thought you lived with your *girlfriend*! You *engaged*, right? To that *Kathy* girl?"

Nodding and smiling, Rachel took another drag. "She is *too*. We're waiting until after we're *married*."

"*Wow*!" the tiny Vietnamese woman stated simply. "You really *are* a good girl!" Raising a round of laughter from the group, they spent the rest of their break admiring Rachel's long red acrylic nails, complimenting her makeup, commenting on how well she could walk in three-inch heels, and noting how perfectly the wig matched her natural hair color with just the slightest touch of red in that made it look like a faded dye job.

Once back inside, Rachel walked up to Doris's cubical and handed her back the coat. "Thank you *very* much for the use of your *lovely* coat, Doris! You didn't *have* to do that!"

"Just hang it back up for me, dear." she requested, as she waited for her next call. "*Carefully*, please! And I *insist* you take it anytime you go outside!" Seeing Rachel about to object, she shook her head slowly. "*No*. You'll catch your *death* if you go outside in this *freezing* weather in *that* dress! I won't take *no* for an answer! Right, *young lady*?"

Rachel almost cried at the touching insistence. Smiling as she nodded, she blushed again. "*Yes*, Mrs. Kane." she answered shyly. "*Thank you*!" Hanging the coat up cautiously so as to not damage the cloth hook loop inside, she returned to her desk and was once again stared at by dozens on the way there. Aware of the attention she was getting made her feel giddy to be noticed like this. She eventually had to just force herself to back down some and focus on doing her job, at least until lunch when the contest would be judged.

Time almost flew by as Rachel relished every moment, even just doing her job. It neared two o'clock when the system stopped feeding people new calls. Once more doffing her headset, she picked up her purse and headed for the restroom. Slowing half a moment as she passed the ladies' room, she swallowed her pride and walked into the men's room like normal, thankful of its emptiness.

After using a stall, she washed her hands and opened her purse, touching up her overdone makeup briefly, just the way Gwen had shown her, before returning to the production floor. Exiting the bathroom, she saw Linda, Thi, and Kristin standing in front of the door and preventing two guys from coming in until she came out. "What's *this*?" she asked curiously.

"We just told them that while *you* were in there, *they* should wait out *here*." Linda explained as she glared at her husband Steven with her arms crossed. "You may have to use the *men's* room, but you don't have to be walked in on while *doing* it!"

"Come *on*!" Steven complained. "We wouldn't have *done* anything to him! Maybe *razz* him a little, but... well... *look* at him! He *had* to know he'd get a ration coming in looking like *that*! You're treating him like he's a *woman*! At *least* give him *some* credit for being able to take a little friendly *abuse*! It's just what guys *do*! Come *on*, Raymond! *Tell* them!"

Not even giving her a chance to respond, the three escorted Rachel away from the restroom and the growing circle of men agreeing with Steven. "Don't *listen* to him, *Rachel*!" Linda scoffed. "I think you look *great* and don't deserve *any* guff from the *guys*!" As Thi and Kristin agreed, Rachel took a breath and decided it was best to just not say *anything*.

The contest itself was simple. Each person that was dressed in a costume would have to walk down the main aisle of the production floor with the rest of the center gathered to either side. Whoever had the loudest applause, as judged by the supervisors, won. Since the entire center was already

buzzing with how much of a shoe-in Rachel was going to be, to be fair, it was decided she would go *last*, so the others that made an effort wouldn't have to follow her.

Waiting through everyone else's 'gauntlet run' was nerve-wracking. She'd never been a popular *boy*, let alone a popular *girl*, so she wasn't used to winning what amounted to a popularity contest. Listening to the sound of applause as each contestant did their walk-through, made her almost cry with her fear of rejection, especially when people like Thi got what sounded like thunderous applause. She gave polite applause to every contestant, and gave her loudest when her friends did their walks, but her confidence was sorely shaken.

This was stupid! she chided herself. *Why did I think for one moment that I could win? Sure, Thi, Linda, Doris... they've been nice, but that's just four or five people out of over a hundred! Almost everyone here has more friends than me, and their friends are sure to cheer for them and not me!* Convinced that she'd outsmarted herself, that by making it so obvious she was a lock to win that she'd end up losing, because everyone would figure that they didn't need to cheer her and help her beat their own friends.

Still, when it came time to do her walk, she decided if she was going to go down, she'd go down swinging. Waiting as she watched the penultimate contestant precede her, she closed her eyes, dropped her fake persona, flipped the black feather boa over her shoulder, raised her chin, smiled seductively, and waited in a sexy pose for her name to be called for Rachel to have her moment in the sun.

"And *finally...*" Shawn yelled over the dying applause, "...the one *everyone's* been *talking* about all day instead of making *sales...* *Rachel the Hooker!*"

Doing her best catwalk through her assembled co-workers, Rachel was floored by the tremendous response. Wolf-whistles, catcalls, yelling, screaming, and so much applause she thought she might go deaf from the

noise that filled her unbelieving ears. With each step, her confidence grew, swaying her hips naturally and pulling the boa from around her neck to use as a prop, dragging it low behind her, pulling it between her fingers playfully, or wrapping it low around the small of her back seductively. Stopping to do a sexy turn and pose in the middle of her walk, she blew a kiss to the crowd to each side, which seemed to only make them yell louder.

When she turned and finished her walk, the noise finally started dying down as her supervisor settled everyone down. "OK, I think it's *fairly* obvious who the *first* place winner is!" he laughed as everyone else joined in. "But we have to judge our *second* and *third* place winners *too*, so..."

Rachel was giddy as Shawn brought back the six other people with the loudest applause from *their* walks, and had people cheer for their favorite as he went through them one at a time. Thi ended up getting third place and a ten-dollar gift certificate, while second prize went to a guy she didn't know who'd just worn a toga. She *knew* he would have won if it had not been for her. He was young, well muscled, and worked in a call center populated by over eighty percent adult women. She also felt bad about Thi effectively being bumped down from second to third place on *her* account, and when they were out having a cigarette again, she told her as much.

"Thi... I... I wanted to *apologize*. If it hadn't been for *me*, you would have gotten twenty-five bucks instead of a ten dollar *gift* certificate!"

"Don't be *silly*!" Thi scolded her. "You *deserve* first place! You did a *great* job!" Her eyes suddenly growing wide, she turned to Rachel. "*Oh!* I just thought! *Tonight!* You gonna wear that for *tonight*, right? You *have* to! *Please* tell me you gonna be like this *tonight!*"

Laughing, as she made sure to ash her cigarette far away from the borrowed full-length fur, Rachel nodded. "*Yes*, Thi! I *promise!* Kathy is wearing a Cleopatra costume, and her friend Gwen who'll be joining us is dressing like a medieval princess! But *yes*, I'll be wearing *this* out tonight!"

The day passed with more of the same. Compliments, praise, and a personal guard anytime Rachel had to use the restroom. Linda told the trio that she'd have to bow out of the evening festivities early, since she had an infant that needed caring for, and also that Steven *wouldn't* be joining them for their night out after all. The most interesting thing for Rachel though was how she was *treated*. Instead of derision, ridicule, or being the butt of everyone's *jokes*, for the first time in her life she was complimented, catered to, popular, and treated like the lady she'd always *been*.

After work, Kathy picked her up as usual, waiting for her in the parking lot with a warm car. Watching Rachel come out of the building surrounded by a throng of other ladies, her enthusiasm became tempered by a pang of jealousy. Seeing her approach happily, Kathy waited until she'd slid into the car with a natural grace she found disquieting from her fiancé. "*Well?* I take it that it went *well?*"

"It was *amazing!*" Rachel crowed like a schoolgirl. "*Everyone* was so nice! Of *course* I won first *prize!*" she giggled as she flashed the money... five twenty-dollar bills. "It was a *hundred* dollar first prize, love! They had money left over from the snacks, and *upped* it at the last minute! Can you *believe* it? I've *never* had that kind of luck! *Never* in my whole *life!* I was *popular!* I'm *never* popular! I'm the one everyone that's popular makes *fun* of!" Sitting back in the car as she took a breath, Rachel smiled in absolute ecstasy. "I will *never* forget how that *felt!*"

Driving back to their apartment, they spent a few hours getting ready, Rachel having Gwen re-do her makeup after taking a shower while Kathy got dressed, then they were out once more to join Thi, Linda, Kristin, and Kristin's husband at Rachel's favorite nightclub. They laughed, danced, drank, and otherwise had a great time, even after Linda had to go home. The group made sure to take several photos of Rachel, promising to use them *against* her someday as blackmail, until she cheekily asked for *copies*.

When Rachel noticed it was after midnight as the six finally were making their way out onto the street, she had a thought that if she were sober she would never have entertained. "Um... *Kathy?* You mind us making a little *detour* before we go home?" she asked beggingly. "*Please!*"

Thi and Kristin laughed with Gwen at Rachel's little-girl-like pleading, mildly irritating Kathy. "That *depends*. Where do you want to *go?*"

Rachel pointed at the casino just across the street. "*There!*"

"*Why?*" Kathy whined. "I *hate* gambling and so do *you!* We can't *afford* to spend any more tonight!"

"Not to *gamble!*" she explained, as she hooked her arm though Kathy's. "That's where my *mom* works, and she started half an *hour* ago!"

Just then Kristen's husband pulled up in their car to collect Thi and his wife, having been Thi's ride out that night. "All aboard the free taxi for anyone that *wants* it!"

After Kristen and Thi hugged Rachel goodbye, it left the three of them alone as the slightly tipsy woman turned back to Kathy. "*Well?*"

Rolling her eyes, Kathy relented. "*Alright!* But *only* for a few minutes and then we go *home, right?*"

Walking up to the corner and crossing when the light turned, Rachel heard someone wolf-whistle from a car and found herself irritated, even though she *knew* she was dressed to attract attention. Entering the casino, the three of them made their way to the pit where the table games were located, Rachel continuing to attract looks everywhere they walked.

When she saw her mother standing at a Blackjack table, she approached casually and waited for her mother to spot her, knowing she shouldn't go

up to the table or interact with her while she was working. She just wanted her mother to see even a shadow of the real her, now that she was all grown up, even if it was just this *once* and wearing something she'd never wear in a *hundred* lifetimes if she'd have been born female.

Laura was just going through the motions of her job like any other day. Being a double holiday, Halloween and Nevada Day, on top of it being a three-day weekend, to her it meant good tips, good hours, and lots of people, one of the main reasons she enjoyed the job in the first place. Looking up, she saw a scantily-clad woman looking her direction, smiled at her briefly out of rote, then noticed she looked familiar somehow and did a double-take as she spotted Kathy, her future daughter-in-law, standing next to her. When Rachel waved her fingers hello, Laura nearly lost count as her jaw dropped. Focusing, she finished the deal before calling for a new dealer so she could take her break.

Waiting by the bar for her mother, Rachel anxiously awaited what Laura would say, and then what *she* would say in return. As Laura made her way over, herself wearing a saloon-girl's outfit for the holiday, Rachel took a breath. "Happy *Halloween*, Mom!"

"My *God*, Ray!" Laura exclaimed as she walked up. "*Look* at you! You look *darling*!" Hugging her youngest daughter, after a brief embrace she looked over at Kathy and turned to hug her while Gwen milled about in the background and waited to be introduced. "*Hi*, Kathy! You look nice as *well*! *Cleopatra*, right?"

"*Yeah*." Kathy said with a sigh. "I was *trying* to go for something as contradictory as *Ray* dressed like a *hooker*, but it's not as nice as he turned out though, *huh*?" Turning, she introduced Gwen to Laura quickly and the two nodded at one another.

"Nice to meet you Gwen." Laura said almost absently. Turning back to her youngest daughter, Laura was astounded at the effect. In no way could she

see anything masculine about her. "*Baby!* What on *Earth* gave you *this* idea for a costume?"

Rachel's heart sank at her mother's fake ignorance. *Like you don't know, Mom? Nice!* She knew the question was meant as a cover for Kathy and Gwen's benefit, but it still hurt that her mother couldn't just compliment her like so many others had done that day. "It was a kind of bet with Kathy." she half-lied. "It *did* win me a hundred bucks in my work's costume contest!"

"You went to *work* dressed like *that*?" Laura asked unbelieving. "And they actually *let* you?"

"Yes, Mom." she answered. *Not everyone's as close-minded as you are!* she added mentally, still keeping up the image of being happy for everyone else's benefit. "Can Kathy get a picture of us together? We look like mother and *daughter* dressed like this!"

After Kathy snapped a photo of the two, Laura began introducing Rachel as her son to several of her co-workers and regulars, mortifying her and making her wish she'd never come to see her. Funnily enough, several of them at first refused to believe Laura that Rachel was male, giving the young woman somewhat of a warm feeling that even total *strangers* saw she looked more feminine than not, despite two decades of living a lie.

Heading home after that, Rachel and Kathy sat in the front while Gwen chatted happily in the back seat. Staying at their place for the night in their spare room, Gwen was ignorant of the coldness of the passing of the night in the main bedroom. Kathy wouldn't even give Rae a kiss goodnight.

Chapter 24 - *For God So Loved the World...*

After a few months, with her bonuses not always as easy to get, Rae noted that with her reduced pay and Kathy's still reduced hours, they were going to have to cut out a lot of extra expenses. No pagers, cable TV, unlimited dial-up Internet, and definitely no going out. The extra strain caused by their financial pinch led to more disputes and unfortunately, further abuse. Kathy would apologize every time she got violent, but the pattern became clear.

Kathy *violently* hated Rachel and everything she represented.

To help offset their lower income, Gwen moved into their spare room and helped with rent and food. Meanwhile, she and Rae were becoming closer friends. Gwen had no interest in Rae romantically, and vice versa, but it didn't stop Kathy from repeatedly accusing the two of having an affair, twice with it resulting in Rae getting hit again. The more it happened, the more Rae began to blame herself for not being good enough.

With Christmas approaching, Rae fell into depression. Her self-loathing combined with Kathy's abusive behavior serving to drive Rae to the depths of despair. Her wonderful time on Halloween only served to illustrate how happy she *could* be, as compared to how low she'd sunk. Inside, she was a roiling mass of built-up frustration, years of emotional isolation, and guilt over how badly she still wanted to be a woman, even under threat of losing her *soul*. Every year the drive just seemed to grow, pushing her to give in and stop living the lie of her false life.

It was in the lowest points of her misery that she contemplated suicide once more, just to get it over with and be consigned to Hell as she felt she was doomed to it anyway. Then, something happened to Rae that would for the first time in her life make her self-loathing begin to ebb. She was continuing her studies in Ancient Greek one evening when she came across a word she recognized. The word was *malakós*.

She knew the word well. It was *that* word that the Apostle Paul had written in First Corinthians in chapter six, verse nine, the one that had condemned her to hate who and what she was and beg God for over a decade to take it away from her. The word that condemned anyone who was *effeminate*. Reading the words and definitions again to be sure, she re-read the biblical passage in the original Greek and saw it once more... *malakós*... but *this* time it took on a whole new meaning. She'd always believed the word meant 'effeminate', as *that's* how it was translated in most Bibles, thus condemning her, but *here* she'd found it didn't mean that at *all*.

It was simply the word *soft*. The same word used to describe a feather or a blanket was used to describe a type of person that would not enter the kingdom of God. She knew Greek words often had multiple meanings that changed with context, so she read and re-read the passage over and over to look for the contextual clues. Finally it dawned on her and she broke out in a cold sweat. *It means weak willed! Do not be deceived! The weak willed will not inherit the kingdom of God!*

Quickly, she deduced the cause of the conflict in the terminology. The King James Bible had been translated in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, a time when women were held to be *incapable* of restraining their emotions and passions and kept as chattel, *ostensibly* to protect them from the fires of their own desire for the good of their immortal *soul*. Of course it had simply been an excuse to treat women as *property*, but it resulted in the colloquial expression of 'effeminate' to mean women not having self-control; that they were *weak willed*. Thus, if a scholar of that time wanted to describe a weak willed person to the people of the time, he would have called them *effeminate*... like a weak-willed woman.

The shock to her system was almost physical. *It's all a lie! Everything! All that I've believed for most of my life is a lie! My life has been a waste... hating who and what I am... for nothing! For a damnable mistranslation!* Just as tears streamed down her face and her faith was beginning to break on the revelation of a truth kept from her, while she lay holding herself and

rocking back and forth trying to stop her descent into madness, Rae was overcome by a sensation. One so powerful that it eclipsed all the pain, shock, and horror of her wasted and tortured life.

It was love.

A feeling of love so overpowering washed over her, threatening to blind her to anything else. An infinite love that was so deep, so complete, that it couldn't even be comprehended in *part*, let alone in *whole*. As she nearly drowned in the feelings filling every corner of her awareness, a new thought entered her mind. She knew it wasn't her *own* thoughts echoing in her mind; *they* always came as words to her conscious mind. This was pure conceptualization unfettered by the limitations of language or interpretation. A pure idea that at once turned her tears of sadness, pain, and regret, into tears of joy.

She knew from where the thought had come... she knew beyond any doubt that The Creator had placed it there to give her an explanation to why she had to suffer turmoil, doubt, fear, and loneliness most of her life. The thought was so complex it would take her *years* to unravel all its meanings and implications. Rae had a *purpose*, one for which she was *specifically* created, that had *required* her to endure all her sorrows.

She would become a voice to people like herself who had been rejected by the Christian faiths of the world to show them that God loved them just as He *made* them. That their struggles and sorrows could bring about a greater good than anyone could imagine, a new enlightenment that would serve to remind Christians of their mandate to love their neighbor as themselves above all things, short of loving God Himself.

Words echoed in her mind that she'd learned so very long ago. "*For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son that everyone who believes in Him may not die but have eternal life.*" What part of '*the world*' and '*everyone*' doesn't include people like me! She knew then what God wanted

of her. That through the suffering of her life, people like herself might come to know her, see part of themselves in her, and in seeing the strength of her indomitable faith and how she had reconciled her identity with her faith, learn to know His infinite love *through* her.

Rae cried. She cried tears of joy at no longer hating what she was combined with tears of terror at the idea that God wanted her to be who He made her to be... a *woman*... to fulfill His plan for her. The responsibility seemed an overwhelming and impossible task. It would mean destroying her entire life as she'd known it, just to build a new one that served *His* purpose rather than her *own*.

Kathy came out of the bedroom having heard the sounds of Rae's crying. "What's *wrong*? Did something *happen*, Ray?"

Looking up at the woman she loved, Rae shook her head. *She'll never stay with me through this! Kathy will leave me if I become what He wants me to be! The promise of salvation through Christ isn't her faith! She won't see the value in destroying my life to build a new one for His sake! If I do as God wants me to do, my family will disown me, Kathy will leave me, I'll lose my job, and everything I've known will all come to ruin!* The enormity of the idea of leaving everything she knew and taking up the cross in His name overwhelmed her and she could only sob as Kathy held her while the strain threatened to consume her. She knew she had to tell Kathy. The woman she loved deserved that much.

Collecting herself, Rae forced the tears to ebb and slowly regained her composure. "I... I had... a... revelation. An epiphany. God *spoke* to me."

Kathy stepped back as Rae slowly stood up. "God... *spoke* to you." she echoed incredulously. "OK... what did He *say*?"

Looking up at her fiancé, Rae could see the doubt and even a little fear in her eyes. "Um... it wasn't words... just... just a thought He put in my mind."

Rae turned and sat at the kitchen table while she recounted what she'd found and what had happened to her over the last hour.

Sitting with Rae quietly, Kathy just let Rae talk. She listened in silence for almost an hour as Rae tried to explain the shock at finding out it wasn't a sin for her to be who she was born to be. Then she tried to convey the feeling of love that had filled her, and then the terror at the idea that God wanted her to become a woman to the world so she could act as a bridge between others like herself and the Christian faith.

Finally, when Rae seemed to be through, Kathy nodded. "*Alright*, but what does that mean for *us*? I mean, I *love* you Raymond. That is, I love *Raymond*, the *male* part of you. I'm *happy* for you that you've found some way of not *hating* that *other* part of your life, but I don't think I could love you as *Rachel*. I'm *sorry*, but I'm not *gay*."

Looking at her lap, Rae nodded. "I *know*."

"And what about your *family*?" Kathy pointed out. "I absolutely *love* your big family! All your cousins, aunts, uncles, great aunts, grandparents. It was so *nice* to feel like I was going to become a *part* of that huge happy family! If you become *Rachel*, we'll *both* lose all that!"

Hearing Kathy speak of becoming part of Rae's family in the past tense caused a pain in her heart as though she'd shoved a red-hot iron through it. "So, that's *it* then? If I become what I was *born* to be, you'll *leave* me?"

Looking away, Kathy nodded. "I'm *sorry*, but I can't marry a *woman*. Why can't you stay the way you *are*, the person I fell in *love* with?"

In that moment, Rae first understood that Kathy had never loved her, she'd loved the person Rae *pretended* to be. She realized then that the only way she could even be *cursorily* loved was if she pretended to be something that she wasn't. *Nobody will ever love me... the real me. Rachel is somebody*

nobody except God, not even my own family, can love. Faced with the reality she knew but hadn't admitted to herself, Rae was forced to choose; be herself and follow God's plan and lose everyone and everything in her life, or ignore His plan and make everyone else happy.

Making her choice, Rae sighed, looked up at Kathy, and did what she'd been taught to do her whole life; she lied for the ones she loved. "You're *right*. I *can't* do it. I can't destroy the life we've just started to build together. I'm *sorry*. It *can't* be this way. I *should* hate that part of myself!"

"*No!*" Kathy sighed frustratedly. "Can't you find a *middle* ground? A way to not *hate* yourself and still be the man I fell in *love* with?"

"I don't see *how*." Rae admitted. "If I don't *hate* my feminine nature, I'll be driven to *express* it. I can't *help* it. My misunderstanding of my faith was the only thing keeping me from expressing my inner self. I either have to believe that it's *wrong* and *hate* it so I have to hide it, or if it *isn't* wrong, I'll *need* to express it. I know myself too *well*. I won't be *able* to stop myself from expressing my femininity if I don't *hate* it."

Thinking for a moment, Kathy nodded. "Then *express* it. Just... just not *everywhere*, like around your family... or *mine*." As Rae listened, Kathy laid out an idea for Rae to feel free to express her true feminine self in private or when around understanding friends, but repressing it around family. "I *really* don't want you to go back to being *unhappy*, Ray! If you *need* to be feminine, we can work *around* it!"

"But you *hate* my feminine side!" Rae pointed out. "You wouldn't even let me *kiss* you on Halloween, even after we got *home*!"

"That's because I'm not *gay*!" Kathy shouted, both of them glad that Gwen was at work until late that night. "*Look*, we can figure this *out*. I'm not *about* to give up on you without at least *trying*, alright?"

Hours passed while they talked, argued, debated, and finally settled on a happy medium that both thought they could accept. Rae would dress and act the same as she had for years in most public settings, including around family and at work, but when she was home or out with accepting friends she would be free to express herself, including dressing as herself. The idea of going out in public as her true self terrified Rae. Halloween had been easy since she had just been wearing a costume. They both knew however that eventually, if Rae was to follow the path God had laid out for her, it was inevitable that Rachel truly go out into the sunlight.

Months went by as Rae began to do what most girls do when they're in the teens. She was finding out what kind of girl she was. She already had a fairly decent idea that she was a lot more feminine than most women she knew. Still, she tried out numerous styles ranging from short daring skirts that barely covered her rear to long conservative-cut dresses. Most she got from second hand stores because they were on discount, so it let her play with fashion and come to know her own style without breaking the bank.

Rachel eventually did dare go out in public. Starting with a transgender friendly convention, it was there that she met two people she already knew. One was an older lady who it turned out used to work with her father at the National Guard when she still lived as a man. The other was Serena, who in her youth had been named Robbie, the same boy that tormented Rae with both William and then later Eric. Serena tried to excuse her bullying as trying to be manlier to escape her desire to be a girl, but Rae had a hard time accepting the explanation.

While Rae also had tried to escape her feminine nature, never in a million years would she have considered beating up others to 'make a man of herself.' Eventually she did forgive Serena, but it wasn't until the angry young lady had moved away, so Rae never got to actually tell her she was forgiven. The fact that they parted with harsh words for one another ate at Rae for years before she managed to also forgive herself.

The real shock came when Tom, the young man who used to work for her, and who was dating Kathy's younger sister Sarah, came out as Brenda. At first Rae thought that perhaps Kathy had told Sarah about Rachel, who in turn told Tom, thus pushing him into trying it out for himself. Soon though, it became clear that much like Rae, Tom had been wanting this for *years*, only finally coming out when she'd moved out of her home and away from the parents that made her be a boy against her will.

Now knowing that at least three people she'd known in her short life were just like her, Rae became more comfortable being herself around others. It also made her relationship with Kathy began to falter. Arguments sprung up more frequently and almost always ending up with Kathy taking her frustrations out on Rae physically. Gwen tried to act as a mediator, being a friend to both of them now, but it didn't seem to be making much difference. By the time another year passed and Rae turned twenty-five, with Kathy still professing her intention to marry Rae that June, their relationship was strained. Rae began sleeping on the couch most nights to escape the fights that would inevitably crop up in the privacy of their bedroom where Gwen couldn't intercede or know that Kathy was still being abusive.

It all came to a head that Valentine's Day. With only four months until the wedding that they'd already begun preparing for, Rae had decided to try extending an olive branch to Kathy and repair the gulf that had grown between them, dedicating herself to being what Kathy needed her to be. Since it was Sunday and Rae had the day off, she spent the day cleaning the apartment, cooking a romantic dinner, and dressing as Raymond for Kathy's benefit. She even got a haircut to demonstrate her commitment to making Kathy happy; something that almost broke her heart as she'd finally started being able to experiment with hairstyles.

Waiting for Kathy to get off work, Rae sat alone in the apartment for hours. When Kathy was four hours overdue, Rae started putting away the now cold food she'd prepared. It was almost midnight when Rae finally heard the key in the lock to their front door.

"Kathy!" she sighed in relief as her fiancée came in. "I was *so* worried about you! I called your work and they said you left at *six*!" Getting up and hurrying to her, she started to try to hug Kathy, only for the woman to turn away. Stopping short and seeing that something was wrong, she swallowed hard. "You... you look *nice*. Where *were* you? What *happened*?"

She shrugged absently. "Thanks." She was wearing a nice eggshell silk blouse and a very dark red skirt with black sandals. Her hair was nicely styled and she'd done her makeup beautifully. "Why are *you* still up? You have *work* in the morning."

Noting that Kathy didn't answer her questions, Rae stepped back. "I... I was waiting for you to come *home*. I... I cleaned and made *dinner* for you." Reaching down to the coffee table, she picked an envelope from out of the dozen roses sitting in a vase there and handed it too her. "I got you this and the flowers for Valentine's Day. Kathy, where have you *been* tonight?"

Taking the envelope, she fidgeted with it before dropping it unopened back on the coffee table. "I went *out*."

Looking at the floor, Rae held back her tears. "I... I wanted to *surprise* you. I guess I should have asked if you had *plans*. It's *my* fault, I guess."

Kathy looked at Rae coldly. "*Yeah*. I guess *so*." Walking over to the couch, she dropped onto it and looked at the wall with their many pictures hanging from it. "We need to *talk*." she stated angrily.

Moving to sit on the far side of the couch, giving some distance between them as she could feel there was something seriously wrong, Rae had to know for certain. "So... did you have a good *time*? *Out*, I mean."

Turning to face Rae, Kathy looked furious. "You aren't even going to *ask*, are you? *God*! You are *such* a *wimp*! Why don't you ask me *who* I was with, *Raymond*?"

She closed her eyes and tried to prevent the tear from falling, but it came and rolled down her cheek. "Who were you *with*?" she asked softly.

Rolling her eyes and looking at Rae disgustedly, Kathy sneered at her before answering nonchalantly as she looked away again. "With *Jeff*, the guy who lives upstairs. He's a *great* guy. He took me to dinner before we came back to *his* place a couple hours ago."

"You're leaving me for him." she stated as the color drained from her face. "I... I cut my *hair* for you... just the way you *like* it."

Shrugging, Kathy wouldn't even look at her. "Not *my* fault. You did that on your *own*. I never asked you to." Taking on a note of regret and sorrow, Kathy sighed and continued less harshly. "Look, I'm *sorry*, Ray... but I need a *man*... and Jeff is a *man*. You *aren't* the same person I fell in *love* with! Jeff *knows* how to treat a woman. He and I... um... we've been..."

Falling back into the despair that Rae had been in when Tina broke off their engagement, Rae felt the room spinning as she realized what Kathy was telling her. "You... you're having an *affair* with him?"

Getting up off the couch, Kathy stormed around the coffee table, almost knocking the flowers to the floor. "You just wouldn't *understand*! Jeff makes me feel *sexy*... and *wanted*! Tonight he just took me up to his apartment and had his *way* with me... and I *loved* it! He's... he's..."

"Exciting? Dangerous? *Passionate*?" Rae answered for her as she stood up. "Like all those sexy pirates who abduct the maiden from the cold arms of the prince who has *everything* to give her, but she doesn't *want* it? Like *that*? I *thought* you said that wasn't what you wanted from a *real* relationship?"

Kathy's face twisted into fury as she walked up to Rae. "You *drove* me to him! You *made* me want a real man so much, I took the first one I could *find*!" Raising her hand to slap Rae down, to her shock Rae caught her

hand mid-swing and held it there. When Kathy tried to hit Rae with her other hand, she caught it as well, while Kathy struggled against her. "Let *go* of me you... you *freak!*"

Releasing her with only a slight backward push, Rae lowered her chin and glared at Kathy across her brow. "This apartment is in *my* name. I want you *out*. You don't *want* me? *Fine!* But neither *you* nor anyone *else* is *ever* raising a hand to me *again!*"

Kathy was out of the apartment by the next morning. Rae called in sick as she slept in the bed she'd bought for the two of them, and sobbed at the ruins of her life. *Is this what you wanted of me Lord? To be alone and unloved so I'd be free to do your works and fulfill your plan for me? Did you have to make it hurt so much?* She hoped that she could feel the infinite love He'd shown her that night just once more so it would ease her pain, but the ache of loneliness and abandonment consumed her. Desperate for someone to reach out to, the only one available was her mother. Dialing though tear-filled eyes, she waited for the voice of the woman who soothed her pains and loneliness when she was still a little girl.

"*Hello?*" Laura answered, making Rae hurt even at the one word sounding so normal as her own world imploded.

"*Mommy! Kathy's gone! She left me!*" she sobbed through all new tears.

"*What?*" Laura answered, blindsided by the news. "*Baby! What happened?*"

Rae tried to tell her, but knew to do so she'd have to tell her the whole story of her revelation, and she didn't want to do that over the phone. "Can... can you come *over*, please? I... I don't have a *car* anymore and... even if I *did*, I shouldn't *drive* right now."

"Give me thirty minutes, baby!" Laura answered. "I'll be over *right* away, OK? Promise me you won't *do* anything?"

"I... I *promise*." Rae answered as she tried to stem the tide of tears. "Just *hurry*, OK?" Her voice was breaking into sobs as she finished.

Just over twenty minutes later Laura pulled up in her car and almost ran for Rae's door. Seeing her coming, Rae opened it and was immediately enveloped in a warm hug. "Oh, *baby!*" Laura comforted her while Rae began sobbing anew. "Come *on*, sit down and tell me what *happened*."

Rae composed herself before she began with how she'd been studying Hebrew and Greek and how it had led to her epiphany and then to her revelation from God. "I... I *know* you don't want to *hear* this Mom, but I *have* to say it! I... I'm a *woman!* I've *always* been one! God *wants* me to be this way! It's *not* a sin! It never *was!* It's all just a stupid *mistranslation!*"

Laura sighed and closed her eyes before answering. "*Raymond*, I *know* you've had these feelings for a long *time*, but *honey*, what makes you think *you're* right when everyone else thinks it's *wrong?*"

"It's *not* everyone, Mom!" Rae defended her newfound faith. "I can show you *lots* of other people that came to the same *conclusion!* First Corinthians was *never* meant to condemn the *effeminate!* That's *not* what Paul *wrote!* He was condemning the *weak willed!* People who have no strength of *character!*"

"Ray... sorry... *Raymond...*" Laura corrected herself. "The Bible most certainly *does* say that men dressing like women is *wrong!*"

"Only in *Deuteronomy!*" Rae pointed out. "It also tells us there that we have to put *railings* around our roof, to not wear clothes made of a mixed *fiber*, that you can't eat *shellfish* or *pork*. *You* do all those things! Those are all in the *Old Testament*, the Torah of the Jewish people! *Christians* don't *do* those things anymore! Jesus *freed* us from Mosaic Law! The need to sacrifice in Temples, the demands of the Torah... *He* became our salvation! Besides, even if you insist that the *one* Mosaic Law we should still follow

is *that* one, then it means I'm forbidden from wearing *men's* clothes, because in my *heart*, in my *soul*, I'm the woman He *made* me to be!"

Laura was flabbergasted. "*Raymond!* Are you saying you're going to live like a *woman* now? Don't you know what that will *mean*? What will your *grandparents* say? Or your *father*? What about *Marie*? You're going to be an *uncle* soon!"

"Aunt." Rae pointed out.

"*Uncle!*" Laura insisted as she shouted at her. "Don't get a smart mouth with *me!* I can still turn you over my *knee!*"

"*No!*" Rae screamed as she moved away from her mother in fear. "Don't you *ever* try to touch me *again!* You don't *know!* You don't know what she... she..." Rae collapsed on the floor and began to sob once again. "Oh *Mom!* It *hurts!* It hurts *so* bad! She... she *hit* me, Mom! A *lot!* But I didn't *care!* She... she always said she was *sorry!* She said she *loved* me! But... but she... she left me for a *man!*"

Laura stood over Rae and looked down as she sobbed like a heartbroken woman. "So *this* is why she left you? Because of this... *lifestyle choice?* Is it *worth* it, Ray? Is *this* really worth you getting your *heart* broken? Don't you think this shows you that God doesn't *want* you to pretend to be a woman? How can you *sit* there and blubber like a *baby!* If you think *this* is hard, just *try* and imagine if you make this *choice*, Raymond!" Laura began to cry for her own reasons. "You'll... you'll never see your little *nephew!* You won't be able to come to family *reunions!* Think of what this will do to your *sister!*"

Rae sniffed as her tears abated and she listened to her mother, anger rising up inside her. "*Really,* Mom? My heart is *shattered,* and you're lecturing me on how this will make *Marie* feel?" After another few sobs at the additional heartbreak that she was still a second-class daughter to Marie,

Rae shook her head as the tears began once more. "Get *out!* I'm sorry I even *called* you! Just... just *get out!* Get *out* and *never* come *back!*"

Her mother couldn't believe what she was hearing. Rae was throwing her out when she needed her mother the most. "*Ray!* How can you *talk* to me that way? I'm your *mother!* Is this what your new *lifestyle* is teaching you? To disrespect your *parents?*"

Shaking her head at the double heartache of her broken engagement and her broken relationship with her family, Rae just sobbed and repeated herself for her mother to get out until she left. After a short time, Rae never certain how long, her phone rang. Answering it emptily, she didn't care who was there. "Evans residence."

"*Ray!*" Marie yelled at her. "Mom called me in tears and told me Kathy broke off the engagement, then said something about you wanting to become a *woman?*"

Taking a breath, Rae forced a calm over herself and answered completely dispassionately like she was just reading the newspaper. "*Yes.* Kathy *dumped* me for my neighbor on Valentine's Day, *cheated* on me with him, and told me the engagement was *off.* So I called Mom and told her, she came over, I told her what happened, that and I'm really a woman and always *have* been, so she told me it was basically *my* fault."

"*Well?*" Marie said incredulously. "What do you *expect?* I always *knew* you were *gay!*"

"I'm not *gay,* Marie!" Rae shouted. "I'm a *woman!* That doesn't mean I want a *man!* Not *all* women want *men!*"

"So, you want to become a woman and date other women?" Marie clarified. "Sounds *gay* to *me!*"

"OK, so I guess I'm a *lesbian* then, but I'm *not* a gay man and I *know* that's what you were *saying!*" Rae stated bluntly. "But can you *blame* me? Men are *assholes!*"

"What about *Dad?*" she countered. "Or *Leonardo?* Don't you *understand*, Ray?" Marie shouted as she started to cry. "If you become a *woman*, I'll never be able to *see* you again! Leonardo won't *allow* it! You'll never be able to see your new *nephew!* How can you *do* this to me?"

Closing her eyes, Rae sniffed back more tears. "That's *your* decision, not *mine*. I *have* to be what God *made* me to be. It's *His* will I'm following, *not* mine. You think I *wanted* this? To be *dumped? Again? Cheated on? Abused? Abandoned* by my *family*, who're *supposed* to love me *unconditionally?* Don't you *get* it, Marie? I *have* to do this! I... I've known for almost a *year* what God wanted me to do, but I was too afraid to *do* it. But *now?* I... I *have* to."

"Don't you *say* that!" Marie cried. "Don't you *dare* try and put this on *God!* You *wanted* this! Ever since we were *kids!* I was *there!* I *know!* You've wanted to be a girl your whole *life*, so don't pretend this is *God's* will! It's *yours!* I'll *never* forgive you for this!"

Sighing, Rae let the anger at her sister's hateful words go. "That's OK, Marie. I forgive you. For *everything*. Know that I'll *always* love you, and I'll *miss* you for the rest of my *life*. Goodbye."

"*No!*" Marie wept as Rae hung up the phone. Rae sat on her bed completely drained. She cried inside as she cried outside and lay down. *I should have known. Mom and the rest of them will never love the real me. No one will. I knew... I always knew... the one thing in life that I ever wanted... to be truly loved... is the one thing I can never have.*

As sleep started to claim her, she drifted into a recurring nightmare of her worst fear. *I'm going to die alone, never really knowing someone loves me.*

Chapter 25 - The Gift

The next few months were grueling for Rachel. Right after Kathy moved out, the call center she worked at closed with no warning, followed by Gwen telling her she didn't feel comfortable staying there now that Kathy was gone. Alone and unemployed, she needed help making the rent, so she invited Jack to come live with her, since he was having trouble with his own roommates. She began by telling him all about her true self. In typical Jack fashion, he shrugged, told her that he loved her no matter what, gave her a hug, and asked her when he should move in.

Barely scraping by, the two of them managed to pay the bills and put food on the table, Rachel using her savings while she looked for a job. In the meantime she cooked and cleaned for him while Jack paid a larger share of the upkeep. It almost felt domestic, were it not for that their relationship had always been like brother and sister.

Rachel considered trying to get a job as herself, but the horror stories she'd read online and her own dwindling savings making transition effectively impossible, made her reluctantly look for her new job as Raymond. She did however, go out as herself with Jack several times for coffee at their favorite restaurant. They would talk about matters of faith, games, women, and just spend time enjoying each other's company. Some people suspected them of being a couple, but the two would always just laugh it off.

Finally finding work at another call center where several of her co-workers had gone, she was thankful that it was only a mile from her apartment, as getting a car again was going to take months of saving. She quickly established herself as one of the center's most productive agents and after a few months, only a few weeks before her twenty-sixth birthday, had earned a promotion to assistant team leader. She often spent time teaching new agents how to be better salespeople, answering questions, and generally being as happy and helpful as she could be while she built up her savings toward her new life.

Two days before her birthday, she was told she'd be assigned several new agents over the next few days to help them learn the ropes. Mostly, this took the form of taking calls in the station next to them so they could hear her technique and she could aid them by answering questions. She had first noticed the cute round-faced young woman when the new trainees had been brought through the center days earlier, oddly enough for the same reasons she'd long ago first noticed Marcy, the woman's fashion sense. Now Rachel would be helping her the next few days.

At lunchtime, she called her apartment as usual to talk to Jack, but this time it went differently.

"*Hey*, Jack! I'm on lunch and it's time for *you* to get up!" Rachel sang into the phone.

"Rae!" Jack breathed a sigh of relief into the phone. "I was *wondering* how I was going to get hold of you! Your *dad* called! Marie's in the hospital and going into *labor*!"

"Is she *alright*?" Rachel asked genuinely concerned. "I mean, is it going *OK*? Did he *tell* you?"

"As far as I *know*, everything's *fine*." Jack reassured her. "Don't *worry*! *She'll* be OK. Will you need a ride to the hospital?"

Sadness overcame her as she shook her head slowly. "No. I... I won't be *welcome* there."

"I'm *sorry*, Rach." he consoled her. "Your dad told me to tell you to call him."

"*Alright*." Rachel sniffed. "I gotta *go* then. See you after work." Hanging up, she dialed the number for her father's new cell phone and waited. When

he answered, she didn't know what to say. She hadn't spoken to anyone in her family since that fateful day four months earlier. "*Daddy?*"

"*Son!*" Gerald shouted, making Rachel cringe. "Your sister's in labor. We're down here at Washoe Med."

"I... I *know*." she answered sadly. "My friend *Jack* told me. Tell her... tell her I *love* her and I'm *praying* for her, *OK* Dad?"

Gerald sighed as he heard the sorrow over the line. "Listen, I know things have been difficult between you two lately, but she wanted me to tell you that she wants to see you. You need me to pick you up?"

"I... I'm at work." she informed him. "I don't get off until nine and I can't take any time off."

"Oh. Well, tell me where it is and I'll pick you up when you get off." he volunteered.

Rachel sighed as she considered the offer. "Did... did she say anything *else*? Anything *specific*?"

"Only that she wanted to see her *brother*." he stated pointedly.

"*Ah*." Rachel noted the distinction. Weighing the cost, she admitted to herself that she missed her family terribly. Even if they didn't really love her, she still loved *them*, desperately and unconditionally. Having figured out that transition would have to wait at *least* two years while she saved really put a new light on her situation. Two years stuck living half a life with only Jack to keep her company, as much as she loved him, would drive her crazy. She *needed* her family and was beginning to doubt God's plan for her could *ever* be achieved given her circumstances. Reaching a decision, she nodded absently. "Alright. I'll come. Let me get you the address."

The rest of the day went by quickly while Rachel busied herself and made sure to let her supervisor Angie know that she wouldn't be able to stay after hours and why. She did manage to answer a few questions from that cute girl. Thinking briefly about asking her out sometime, Rachel dismissed the idea almost immediately. *What are you? Stupid or a glutton for punishment? How many times are you going to let yourself get hurt before you realize that women can be just as bad, if not worse than men? No! Just put her out of your head and do your job!*

When nine o'clock came around, Rachel was out the door and walking to her father's minivan. Riding with him for a few minutes in silence, Rachel broke it first. "Um... thank you for coming to pick me up."

"Not a problem." Gerald said as he drove. "I've *missed* you."

Almost crying, Rachel nodded. "I missed you all, *too*. It's been... a hard few months."

"It didn't *have* to be." he retorted compassionately. "You were *always* welcome."

Laughing lightly, she shook her head. "I don't *think* so, Dad. Marie was pretty *clear* when we spoke. Frankly, I'm surprised she asked to *see* me."

"Well, *whatever* happened between you two, you're her *brother* and she *misses* you." he commented. "And that will *never* change."

"*Right*." Rachel nodded. "Her *brother*."

Silence filled van for the rest of the drive to the hospital. After they parked and walked into the building, Rachel staying slightly back, she followed her father until they entered the maternity ward. Seeing several of her family members gathered in the hallway, including her grandma Jewel, her aunts Jane and Cathy, her step-father Mick, and to her dismay, Leonardo.

Stopping to get a drink from a water fountain, she lingered there for a moment while Gerald joined the others, only turning to note her absence once he reached them.

Rachel didn't know if she could go through with this or not. Inside a war raged between her unconditional love for her family and the need to find acceptance in them, and making them understand God's hand in her unique nature. *Walking over there is tantamount to giving in to their worldly beliefs.* she argued against going. *If I do this, they'll never believe my convictions were holy, they'll just pretend like nothing ever happened and go right back to pushing me to be the man they expect me to be based on their flawed translation of scripture.*

Taking a breath as her father waved her forward, Rachel let it out and slowly started walking toward them. *No. I'm doing this for them. If I don't go now, I'll never get another chance and their minds and hearts will be closed forever. I was called to bring the Good News of His infinite love to all God's children, even those who think I'm an abomination and will hurt and slander me. No matter what they say, or how they hurt me, I'm still me... and nothing they say can change that. I may be dressed in a suit and tie for now, but nothing lasts forever. Inside I'm still and always will be Rachel Michelle Evans!*

Her assessment of her family was accurate. It seemed that they all went out of their way to repeatedly slap her with the hurtful labels of uncle, Son, brother, and Raymond as often as possible. Leonardo was more polite than Rae expected him to be, but still made it clear that he looked down on her beliefs. When at last her sister gave birth, it was shortly after midnight, the day before her birthday. Seeing her infant nephew melted Rachel's heart just the same as all the other women there, and it was all she could do to not weep.

When at last her father drove her home, she at last wept silently. While he drove, they talked briefly about things that had happened with the family

during Rachel's forced absence. For her part, she only talked about work and never mentioned her continued efforts at her special ministry online, changing one person's heart at a time to turn back to God. *Make certain you do not perform your religious duties in public so that people will see what you do. If you do these things publicly, you will not have any reward from your Father in heaven.* she reminded herself. The only other thing they talked about was her birthday. Gerald offered to take her out to dinner, which she accepted politely.

As soon as she got home, Jack already gone to work his graveyard shift as a security officer, she silently changed into her peach silk nightgown and slipped into bed exhaustedly. Crying once more at the beauty of childbirth, she also cried for the pain of the hurtful way her family treated her. She knew their words weren't *intended* to be cruel, at least from some of them, but the road to hell was paved in such intentions. She also cried for her own inability to carry and mother a child of her own someday. She knew then what it was like for her ailing Great Aunt Vera, who loved her nephews and nieces dearly, but was never able to have any children of her own.

The next morning, Rachel awoke feeling like she'd run a marathon. Still emotionally exhausted, she threw on a silk robe, went to the bathroom, stumbled into the kitchen, turned on the coffee pot, lit a cigarette, and got out the eggs to make breakfast for Jack who would be home soon. Finishing the toast just as she finished her cigarette, grateful of the rapid pain relief, she was just assembling the plates when Jack walked in.

"*Hey!* How did it go, *Auntie?*" he asked, as he dropped his things to the floor and made for the table. "*Marie* OK? How's the *baby?*"

"It went *fine.*" Rachel shrugged sleepily. "His name is Nicholas Travis Martinez, he was born at twelve twenty this morning, eight pounds two ounces, and Marie is doing *fine.*"

Nodding, Jack sat down to his eggs, toast, and glass of milk. "*Good*. Now how did the *rest* go?"

"What? *Oh!* Seeing my *family* again?" Rachel breathed a melancholy sigh. "About what you'd *expect*. Acting like nothing happened, lots of references to 'uncle', 'brother', 'Son', et cetera. Basically taking every opportunity to shove a fork in my heart and belittle my convictions."

Jack shook his head as he finished a bite. "*Sorry*, Rach. If it's any consolation, you're gonna make a great wife for somebody, someday!"

Smiling at his compliment, Rachel picked at her breakfast. "*Thanks*, Jack. That *reminds* me. Laundry is tomorrow. Make sure you've got yours in the *hamper*, please? I'm *not* digging through that disaster you call a room for dirty *clothes* again!"

"It's not a *disaster!*" he exclaimed defensively. "It's all *organized!* I know right where everything *is!*"

"*Yeah!* On the *floor!*" she ribbed him back. Finally deciding she needed to eat, she joined him in breaking her fast, before collecting the dishes, rinsing them, and putting them in the dishwasher. Taking a good long shower, she luxuriated in it for half an hour and shaved her legs, pits, and other body hair like her arms, and what little she had on her chest before toweling off and picking her outfit for the day.

While she couldn't wear noticeably feminine clothes to work, she bought her slacks, socks, and most other garments from the women's section. Picking out a simple pair of black lady's slacks she'd ironed a few days before, she matched it with a men's long-sleeve white button-up, a creamy gray striped tie, and even though the weather was warm, added her gray sweater vest. Pleased that, if not feminine, it was at least well coordinated, she got dressed after blowing out her still short hair. *It'll grow back, someday!* she consoled herself.

As she headed out into the living room to get her lunch, Jack was already engrossed in the latest computer game he'd been playing. "Need a ride to work?" he asked absently.

"No thanks." Rae answered. "I want to walk today. I need time to think, and I can't do that with you violently colonizing Alpha Centauri in the background!"

"It's only violent when those stupid commies attack me!" he smiled at her.

"Eh. *Whatever!*" Putting on her sunglasses, she opened the door. "See you when you get home from work. *Please* don't forget to put your laundry in the basket, and *don't* stay up all afternoon playing video games!"

"Yes, *Mom!*" he shouted at her as she closed the door.

Rachel didn't really want to walk, but she did want time alone. Considering whether she should resume regular contact with her family was weighing on her mind. She believed in the cause God had set out for her, but she was also desperately lonely. She'd extended some olive branches the night before, so she knew if she knocked the door would be open to her, but what she *couldn't* decide was how she could move forward with her ministry with her family without tripping their alarm bells that she was doing so.

Twenty minutes later, she arrived at work with over ten minutes to spare. Having a cigarette before going to log in, she checked her assignment for the day and saw she was going to be working the phones. *That means they'll be sitting newbies with me.* she realized. *I wonder if that cute girl that wore that darling cream blouse and yellow wool skirt will get assigned to me?* Shaking her head and dismissing the thought as pure fantasy, she went in to work. Funnily enough, that's exactly what her supervisor did. Making Rae a little nervous that the attractive young woman was going to be sitting next to her most if not all of the day, she at first just nodded to the young woman to her right and got ready to enter the digital queue.

Traci Jackson had noticed Rae her first day on her new job. She'd quit working her last job because she wasn't getting anywhere, and took this one as it sounded interesting and the pay was better. While she was being given the 'grand tour' of the small building, she noticed Rae sitting at a cubical and smiling as she talked to a potential customer on the phone. When her team leader sat her next to Rae that early afternoon, Traci was almost as nervous as Rae.

"Hi!" she started with a smile, extending her hand to Rae. "I'm *Traci!*"

Taking the offered hand, she gently shook it and smiled back. "*Rae*. Nice to *meet* you."

The two chatted amicably over the next few hours, Rae pointing out things she saw Traci doing that were either inefficient uses of her time or bad vocal techniques that would reduce her sales. As the day progressed though, Rachel noticed the young woman glancing at her, much the same way Marcy had done all those years ago.

When Traci saw that Rae had noticed her glances, she'd smiled at Rae as though she knew a secret.

Breaking out in a cold sweat, Rachel took a restroom break. Convincing herself that the young lady was just being friendly, Rachel took a deep breath, tried to relax, and went back to her seat. No sooner had Rae put her headset back on when Traci undid all her efforts.

"Welcome *back*." she said softly. "I *missed* you."

Now Rachel couldn't deny it. Traci was flirting with her.

When lunch came, the two talked briefly before Traci joined a few of the ladies she knew from her training class. Now certain that the much younger woman, she being only twenty while Rachel was only hours away from

turning twenty-six, was actively interested in her, she needed time to think. *Can I do this?* she asked herself. *Should I do this?*

Rae had never been shy about asking girls out. The worst they could do was say *no*, but at this point in her life Rachel feared the word *yes* even more. *You really are stupid, you know that? Here you are, months after Kathy dumped you on Valentine's Day of all days, cheated on you, ripped out your heart, and indirectly caused a rift between you and your family, and you're thinking about doing it again? You just got free to be who God wants you to be, to follow your calling, and now you want to mess it all up?*

Even still, Rachel knew she needed to be loved, and the way things were shaping up with her family that wasn't going to happen anytime soon. Oh, they loved *Raymond*, but that wasn't *real* love, because Raymond wasn't a real *person*. Love requires *knowing* someone, and her family didn't know her and had no *desire* to, so they couldn't *possibly* love her beyond the impersonal Christian love of all mankind, or the obligatory love of family, and that wasn't the love Rae *needed*. The closest thing she had to that kind of love was with Jack, and that was just brotherly.

Looking into her heart, she forced herself to be totally honest with just what kind of woman she really was. *I'm going to fall in love again. I can't help it. I love too easily and I love forever. For God's sake, I still love Kathy! And Tina, and Kymberly, and Julia, and Marcy... heck, even Harmony! I guess I always will.*

Resigned to her own need for love and affection, Rachel knew what she had to do. *So? I'll ask her out, but from now on I'll tell any woman that I date about the real me, first thing! Before attachments grow, they'll know who I really am! That way they go into things with their eyes wide open. No excuses that I'm different than they thought I was, or that I've changed, like what happened with Kathy. Lesson learned!* Gathering her fortitude, she took a breath and got ready to go back into work.

Throughout the rest of the day, she openly flirted back whenever Traci did. The end of their shift approaching, Rachel had worked herself up to ask the young lady out to coffee where they could more easily get aquatinted, and most importantly, where Rachel could tell Traci just who it was she'd been flirting with all day. When the young woman grabbed her things and just walked for the door without even so much as a 'see you tomorrow', Rachel almost balked, but quickly dismissed her fears, gathered her things, and ran after her.

Catching her just as Traci approached her car, she slowed so she wouldn't scare the girl. Seeing her turn and smile, Rachel's heart fluttered in her chest. *Here goes!* "Traci!" she said only a little winded. Catching her breath for a moment as she walked up to where Traci stopped, Rachel smiled. "I was *wondering*. Would you like to go out for coffee sometime? Just kind of talk, hang out, get to *know* one another?"

Traci turned her head slightly and blushed. "Sure. I'm free *tonight*. *You?*"

Rachel had expected that maybe they would just set up an evening at some point later that week. The last thing she expected was for Traci to be so eager and available. "Um... let me *think*. No, *I'm* free! I *would* need a ride."

"Hop *in!*" Traci offered with a smile as she unlocked her car.

Going to a nearby restaurant, they sat at a booth together and chatted about themselves. Rae told her about growing up in and around the area, while Traci told her how she was also a native Nevadan. Rae learned that night how she'd already lost both her birth parents, her mother to suicide and her father most recently to a car accident. The only family Traci really had left was her stepmother, and *she* had almost died in the car with her father. Becoming more comfortable in each other's company, Traci scooted closer.

"*Here*. That looks uncomfortable." she noted, looking at Rae's tie. "Let me help you with that." While Rachel sat with a deer-in-the-headlights look on

her face, Traci smiled a bit wickedly as she undid the buttons pinning Rae's collar to her shirt, then loosening the tie, slipped it from around the older woman's neck. "*Relax!*" she smiled as she undid the top button of Rae's shirt. "I'm not going to *bite!* *Much...*"

They talked together for hours. When the restaurant closed at midnight, they were *still* talking, but Rachel hadn't been able to make herself tell Traci who she was yet. Walking toward Traci's car, she bit her lip nervously. "Traci? I *really* don't want to go home yet. Would you like to go somewhere we can keep talking? It's a nice night out!"

Glad that Rae had said it first, Traci nodded. "There's a park near where I live. We can go *there* if you like. Oh, and it's after midnight. I'm glad I get to be the first one to tell you. Happy *Birthday!*"

"*Thanks!* The park sounds *nice!*" Rachel admitted nervously. *I have got to tell her! First thing when we get there! It's a perfect place! You can't let this day end without telling her the truth!*

On the drive to the park, Rachel got to hear Traci sing along with a song on the radio, her heart melting at the beauty of the younger woman's voice. Finally pulling to a stop at the park that was only a few blocks away from where she'd had her slumber party with Marie and Harmony more than half a lifetime ago, they sat in awkward silence together for a moment before Traci spoke. "Would you like to go for a walk?"

"*Sure!*" she accepted nervously. Walking through the park path together, they continued to talk, Rachel building slowly up to her ultimate point. "So anyway, she left me on Valentine's Day just this year after almost three years together. We were *supposed* to be married last month. In fact, just six days ago. The last Saturday in June."

"That's *awful!*" Traci offered in condolence. "Why would she *do* that?"

Taking a seat on the retaining wall they were walking by, Rachel let out a sigh. "That's a long *story*, Traci. One that starts when I was three."

Hours later, as the sun was just threatening to begin pushing back the night, they were *still* talking in the park. Rachel had finally done it. She'd told Traci *everything* about who she was, her long history of confusion, self-loathing, and eventually her revelation. She also told Traci of her capacity to love easily and forever, and finally she came to her current dilemma. "Traci, you're *wonderful!* You've sat here all *night* with me and listened and asked questions. I'm *already* falling pretty hard for you, but I have to ask. You don't think I'm a *freak*? After all I've *told* you?"

Sighing as she patted the cinderblock wall she sat on, Traci waited for Rachel to sit next to her. Taking the older woman's hand, she held it in her own. "Rae, my father taught me to look *beyond* the physical, to judge people by who they *are*, not how the world *sees* them. You... are *amazing!* You've been through *so much* and yet you *still* asked me out! Then you risked it *all* to tell me who you really are inside! Don't you see what that *says* about you? You're *special*. You have a *gift* from God! Your heart is *so* open, and *so* beautiful it makes me want to..."

Leaning over, her right hand still holding Rachel's left, Traci reached up with her free hand and put it around the back of Rachel's neck. Pulling slowly, she kissed Rachel gently and lovingly. When Rachel softly melted into her arms, Traci just became more impassioned. After several minutes, the two finally ended their first kiss of many.

"*Woah!*" Traci exclaimed as she tried to recover from her impulsive expression of affection. "You weren't *kidding!*"

Rachel was awestruck at her own reaction to the bold and passionate kiss Traci had all but forced on her. It was difficult to admit to herself, but at last she understood the power of the appeal of passion amongst most other women. Almost having to physically shake herself back to full awareness,

Rachel took a few moments to process what Traci had said. "Huh? About *what?*"

"About *you!*" Traci explained. "I don't know how *anyone* could know you and not see how *beautiful* you are inside, Rachel! You're *exactly* who and what you *say* you are! I consider myself lucky just to *know* you, let alone have a *chance* with you!"

"A *chance?*" Rachel asked with a smile, her heart glowing with warmth at hearing her name come from Traci's beautiful lips.

"A chance to do that *again*, and *again*, and *again*, for the rest of our *lives!*" Traci answered as she enveloped Rachel in a warm loving embrace and kissed her once more as the sky began to brighten with the dawning of a new day... a perfect day... the birthday of a lifetime of beautiful days the two would share for decades to come.

For like in the Disney fairy tales Rachel had loved since she was a little girl, '*the two lived happily ever after.*'

Epilogue

Rachel bit her lip nervously. "Are you *sure* I look alright, love?" she asked for the hundredth time that evening. Adjusting her jean jacket and tousling her heavily hair-sprayed and styled curly red hair with expertly manicured nails, she looked at herself in the mirror. The black dress showed off a lot more cleavage than Rachel was used to, but there was no way she was *not* going to wear this dress out tonight.

It'd been eight years since they'd last gone out for New Years Eve, usually content to sit at home alone while their two boys, Leslie Travis and Bryant Vere, spent the night over at their Aunt Marie's house having New Years with their cousins Nick, Lucio, and Anna. This year though the boys would be going to Nick's apartment since he was out on his own. Leslie and Lucio were both eighteen and the youngest, Bryant, was sixteen and a half and eager to have a night free of parents. Rachel stopped for a moment and marveled at how far her life had come.

Traci had wasted no time after their first date. Within two weeks she'd asked Rachel to marry her, and before they'd even known one another two months they were wed in front of their families. The following December they repeated the ceremony with Rachel finally able to wear her white wedding gown, and *that* day became their anniversary. Her mother Laura had been at the small church where the ceremony was held, as well as Jack, Joseph, Bea, and the youngest attendee, Leslie still in Traci's womb and not due for another seven months. It had been there that the two had announced their pregnancy, Rachel hugging her mother happily as Laura learned the news.

They'd built a life together. They held each other on 9/11 with their infant son blissfully unaware of the turmoil around him. Traci supported Rae when she once more applied for a waiver to enter the Navy and help defend the country she loved, even though it would mean putting off transition until after she'd done her duty. She then held her again as Rae cried at her repeated denial. They wept for joy together at the birth of their second son Bryant twenty months later. They were saddened at the passing of Rachel's

Great Aunt Vera, and then her grandmother, Edna 'Jewell' Prichard, then again nine months after that when her husband of fifty years, Rachel's grandfather, Willard Prichard, passed to join her.

All through this time Rachel kept at her ministries online and worked on changing her family's perspective, putting off her transition until she was sure that she could do so once more without alienating her family. Finally, allowing a year after the death of her grandfather to pass in respect for him, Rachel told her family that she was no longer going to keep up appearances for their sake. She had already begun transition and her name had already been changed to Rachel Michelle Evans, the name she *should* have had at birth, months earlier.

They reacted badly, and Rachel once again found herself frozen out of her extended family's lives. She knew when she'd seen the confusion in her baby boys' eyes every time their Mom had to dress like a man to go to a relative's house, or when Rachel had heard her oldest son recount what her mother Laura had said to him about his 'dad' when she wasn't there, it was time to drop the act and force the issue out into the open.

Rachel's mother Laura was the only one who made efforts for the next four years, but Rachel watched as her mother struggled to even say her name and kept referring to her as her son. The worst was the effect it had on their boys. When Laura canceled another visit to see them, not having kept a single visit for the last six months, and they learned that she had gone to see *Marie's* children that same weekend, it was the final straw. When they bought their house, Rachel just hadn't told anyone where they moved. Her family was being intransigent and wasn't listening anymore. She and Traci decided that it was better for the boys for them to simply not expect to see their family anymore rather than deal with the crushing disappointment of promised visits that never came.

Three more years would pass before any of Rachel's family saw her again. It would take the near death of her youngest son Bryant in a car accident at

age twelve, one that also claimed the life of Traci's step-mother Shelly Jackson, to make them face her. Having broken through the barrier, and forced to actually *see* the woman she'd become, the ice had started to melt.

What surprised Rachel most was that Marie's husband, Leonardo, the man who was the very epitome of masculine pride, became one of her strongest supporters. He seemed to go out of his way to treat Rachel like he would any other woman, and had started naturally referring to her as '*your sister*' to Marie. Her sister's children had taken to '*Aunt Rachel*' as though it had never mattered, but Marie could barely force herself to use the name 'Rae' and often stumbled over her words to prevent herself from calling her 'Raymond' or saying 'he' when talking about her.

Laura had come around as well. When Rachel's stepfather became terminally ill with cancer, Rachel had made extra efforts to help support her mother in her greatest time of need. One afternoon, when Rachel had taken Laura out to lunch trying to give her mother a break from the strain of Mick's ailing health, she cried with joy when Laura introduced her several times to people as '*my youngest daughter*'. When Mick finally passed, Rachel was there to hold her mother's hand as she said goodbye to the man they'd both loved for nearly thirty years.

Her father Gerald was a strange case. He'd not been happy with not seeing her for nearly seven years, but he felt there was nothing he could do, so he just accepted it as something he couldn't change. When Bryant was nearly killed though, nothing would stop him from seeing her. It took *time, months* in fact, but in the end he'd seemed to fully accept that Rachel was honestly who she'd said she was all along. It helped that she was happy, healthy, and that her two sons seemed to be perfectly normal teenage boys. After that he enjoyed his visits to his daughter's home every Saturday night to talk, watch a movie, have dinner, and generally just be a family again.

Not everything in her family life was wonderful. Laura's sister Jane, while *seemingly* accepting, would go out of her way to introduce Rachel to

people as '*...my nephew, Raymond.*' despite that not having been her name for over a decade and while wearing a white satin dress. Even her Aunt Cathy, a staunch Christian, at least always called her 'Rae' and went out of her way to be if not sympathetic, truly tolerant and respectful.

Her Uncle Darryl, on the occasion of Laura's sixty-fifth birthday, had told her that he thought her raising the boys as their mother was '*disgusting and perverted, and you should be ashamed of yourself!*' Even at Mick's funeral, he went out of his way when walking by Rachel to glare at her and loudly declare, '*Hello, Raymond!*', purposefully in front of people she didn't even know. The other men in her family just ignored her.

While Rachel fussed over her eighties outfit, there was a knock on the door.

"Knock, knock!" Jack shouted as he and Athena, his wife of eight years, came into the Evans home, just like every Tuesday night. Seeing Rachel fixing her outfit, he stopped and dropped his jaw. "*Wow! You look great! I must be the luckiest guy around! Here I get to go out with four beautiful women tonight!*" The fourth he referred to being Traci and Rachel's co-wife, Regina. They'd met on Traci and Rachel's seventh anniversary and been inseparable ever since.

Looking at the brother of her heart, his hair turned a salt-and-pepper mix of brown and gray, Rachel smiled broadly at him. "*Thanks! You really think it says 'eighties' enough?*"

Looking her over from head to toe, he shrugged. "*Well, maybe if you had a Walkman, but other than that...*"

"Don't *tempt* me! Traci still *has* hers!" she joked. Fixing Jack's collar after hugging him, she clucked her tongue. "*All black. How did I guess?*"

"Well, this is what I *wore* in the eighties!" he pointed out. "It was either *this* or my old fatigues I wore for the *second* half of the eighties!"

"I'm *kidding!*" Rachel laughed lightly. "You look *fine!*" After fixing a few things on Athena's outfit, the five of them left for the evening. The casino they were going to that night was obviously doing an eighties retro theme at one of the lounges for the New Year.

As the night wore on, Rachel couldn't help but be sentimental. Using a tissue from her little black purse, she dabbed a tear from her eye as she nearly cried at the beauty of the moment. Watching Regina and Traci dance and hamming it up to *Tainted Love* made her laugh. When the song ended and *Take On Me* began, she giddily jumped up, grabbed Jack's hand, and dragged him to the dance floor where she sang, danced gaily, laughed, and was a care-free teenage girl, just as she'd wanted to be thirty years earlier.

When midnight came she kissed Traci, Regina, and even Jack, though in his case it was just a peck on the cheek, then went outside with Traci to call their children. Wishing them a Happy New Year, Rachel took the cell phone and dialed her father. She was a little tipsy from her fourth shot of tequila, but not stumbling drunk. Just *happy*.

"*Hello?*" Gerald answered.

"Happy *New Year*, Daddy!"

"Happy New Year, *sweetheart!*" he replied.

"I love you *so much!*" she nearly cried.

Hearing that his younger daughter was just a little drunk, he laughed.

"Well, be *careful*, have *fun*, and I'll see you on Saturday!"

"*Bye*, Daddy! See you *Saturday!* I love you!"

"Love you, *too!* Happy New Year!"

She tried calling her mother, but there was no answer. Worried about her mother being alone on New Years Eve after losing Mick just a few months earlier, she sighed but knew that Laura was a strong woman who would endure this like she did everything else in life, with determined faith. Rachel and the rest of the group danced together another hour before the band called it quits for the night. With each dance though, Rachel took back a piece of her missed childhood.

While Regina drove them all home, Rachel turned inward and thought about the evening and everything that led up to it. *Here it is, twenty-twenty, and my life is complete! I'm a happily married housewife, I have two wonderful children, Leslie graduated with Honors, Bryant is doing well in school again, Traci has her new job, we had a wonderful Christmas at Marie's house, and then this. This night, right now, it's like the Prom I never got to have! I even still turn heads wherever I go, and me turning forty-seven this year! And it's not because they see a man in a dress, it's because they see me, Rachel Michelle Evans, a beautiful woman!*

Rachel looked at the tapestry of her life and smiled. Everything in her life, good and evil, happy and sad, joyous and heartbreaking, had led her to this day. This perfect day and so many others she'd known for the last twenty years since meeting Traci that would never have happened. Take away any of her pains, heartaches, sorrows, abuses, stupid mistakes, *any* of it, and her whole life would unravel.

I was born Rachel Michelle Evans, a girl in a boy's body. If I had been a normal boy, Traci would never have fallen in love with me, or if I had been a normal girl, Traci and I couldn't have had Leslie and Bryant, and I'd sooner die than lose them! If Daddy and Mom hadn't kept me from becoming a girl as a teenager, the boys wouldn't exist and life would be meaningless without them! If it hadn't been for Kathy, I'd have never stopped hating myself. If it hadn't been for Tina, I'd have never met Kathy. If it hadn't been for Eric and getting kicked out of school, I'd have never met Jay and then Tina. If it hadn't been for William, I'd have been able to

join the Navy and never would have met any of them! If it hadn't been for Todd, George's example wouldn't have been pushing me to avoid drugs to escape my pain. If it hadn't been for Harmony, I never would have learned to love so selflessly. I needed it all! I regret nothing in my life! Only God can know the good that can come from the bad, and my life is worth all the pain it took to get here!

Thank you, Lord! Just... thank you! Thank you for my wonderful life!

About the Author

Writer of two compelling fiction novels that study the human condition, *Lost Faith* and *Every Day Is Your Last*, Roberta Elder has drawn on her own life experiences to craft her new novel, *For God So Loved The World....*

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.