

EVERETT DEWITT EVERETT DEWITT



# Carrolwood



# CARROLWOOD

By

*T.G. KADEE*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

I began Carrolwood with the idea I would like to write a rivals to lovers type gender bender story. It seems a popular story these days, and since I had never really written one I decided to give it a go, aided in my efforts by a narrative voice that just started speaking the story to me as I wrote.

I hope you enjoy reading about my intrepid heroes and their perilous path to romance!

## **Legal Notes**

Fiction, people. Fiction. This this story is not based on any real people. Any resemblance is purely coincidental.

## **Thanks**

I would like to thank all my amazing supporters on Patreon for supporting me through their generous donations. You are all awesome badness on parade, and this story was and always will be for you!



## PROLOGUE

Carl Bright and Sunni Linn did not dislike each other. They hated each other. And, some would say, for good reason. They were, after all, very much alike, being over-achievers of the highest order.

Carl and Sunni had battled to be named valedictorian of their class since freshman year at Carrolwood Extraordinary Day School. Each maintained a perfect 4.0. Freshman year, Carl had won the science fair with his project on the gravitation's effects of the multi-verse on the surface of Pluto. The next year, Sunni had won for her project on quantum flubber, for which she had also received a patent. The next two year, they shared the prize, mostly because none of the judges had in any way understood what they'd been working on. Humbled and too proud to admit they were baffled, they had simply punted.

Ah, but perhaps the reader is thinking that these two remarkable students were limited to only intellectual superiority? Not so. Carl served as captain of the boys' soccer team (for those of you who are not versed in American, that would be the sport all the rest of the world rightly calls football.) Sunni served as captain of the girls' soccer team. Carl competed in the Olympian sports of discus and javelin. Sunni in gymnastics and swimming. Both of them ran track.

Indeed, not only were these two stellar students so well-rounded as to make a hula hoop cry, but they also reigned among the students at Carrolwood as the two most popular students, somehow finding the time to involve themselves in numerous clubs while also



partaking of the measured and genteel social life orchestrated by the fine faculty and parents of their elite academy.

Were these two perfect? No, for, perfection does not exist on this plane of existence. Carl, it was noted particularly among the females of the school, had a mole on the right cheek of his otherwise perfectly symmetrical and remarkably handsome face. Sunni, on the other hand, the boys noted, had a small scar on her chin.

All agreed, however, that these flaws only made the two all the more “dreamy.”

While the story of their first three years at Carrolwood is fascinating and full of operatic sturm und drang, the story of those years must be reserved for another time. This story is the tale of their truly incredible and impossible senior year. The year that they—changed.





## CHAPTER 1

It was two weeks into the fall semester, as I recall. The weather had cooled, and the trees had begun to lose the fervent iridescence of their summery youths, the first flaring golds and smoldering reds flaring amongst the fading green. In contrast to the towering oaks and elms that dotted the ancient campus, the sap in the students ran high as they hurled themselves back into the buzzing, busy life of the campus. The first singularity occurred at precisely 10:23 am, during Advanced Quantum Physics for Majors. Sunni had just finished covering the chalkboard in a remarkable jumble of equation, which demonstrated the third proof of Garylon's multi-verse theory, correcting an error she had discovered and which had stymied all the best minds in the field for over half a century.

"Remarkable," Professor Nancy Sharp said as the class applauded and Sunni did a little ballet bow—at least 43% of which she had clearly telegraphed as ironic, while the other 57% was just showing off. "Very impressive."

"Oh," Sunni said, waving off the compliment. "It's just math."

"Who," Sharp said, addressing the class, "can tell me the implications of this correction for Garylon's fourth proof?"

Carl's hand shot into the air and remained there, straight as a ruler. Sharp scanned the rest of the class. She liked to at least give the other students a moment to consider. They all looked away, or busied themselves with rolling their pencils back and forth across their desks. Sharp nodded. "Carl?"

Carl explained the implications in precise, succinct language that so utterly clarified the implications that the eye of the other students lit up, and they eagerly jotted down his words in their notebooks. Carl's deep, bass voice, which the girls called "sonic chocolate" filled the room, and many of the girls sighed as he talked, thinking how wonderful it would be to chat with him about— anything. Carl smirked at Sunni, who slit her eyes.

"Excellent," Sharp said, as she, herself, felt enlightened and a little tingly after his speech.

Which is when it happened.

Carl opened his mouth and said, "It's just math." But instead of filling the room with his manly bass, the words came out in the most lovely, musical soprano voice. In fact, he had sounded exactly like Sunni, who was, of course, the best singer among all the girls at Carrolwood and had played the lead in every musical.

The class, failing to note Carl's eyes go wide with the shock of betrayal as his hand shot to his throat, laughed. They thought he was making fun of Sunni and were delighted that he sounded JUST LIKE HER.

"Not appropriate," Sharp said, wagging her finger.

"I didn't..." Carl started to object, but immediately stopped speaking as once more he heard that sweet and alluring feminine voice come from his throat.

The bell rang. A shocked and disturbed Carl gathered his books, quickly assuming his usual mask of confidence, eager to cover up his discomfort. He meant to find a private place to test his voice, maybe take a throat lozenge. His mind ran through all the known throat ailments, but he could remember none that would cause

someone's voice to— change. His plans, however, came to an abrupt end when Sunni planted herself in front of him, her hands on her hips, her eyes burning with fury as she stared up into his face. “It’s sexist to make fun of the way girls talk!” She said.

Carl focused. Carl concentrated. He placed- or tried to place— his voice deep in his chest, but when he spoke? “I’m not making...” Once more, that lovely soprano trilled from his lips. “I’m not making fun of how you talk!” He forced himself to say, appalled at how much he sounded like a snotty female.

Sunni put her hands on his chest and shoved him. “Jerk!” She said, spinning, ponytail flying as she stormed off.

Carl was not so embarrassed by his voice that he was able to fully ignore the way her long, athletic legs flashed as she walked away, nor the way her little, plaid pleated skirt swayed furiously from side to side. Indeed, he had long thought he would find her quite attractive if she weren’t— her. But for now, such thoughts quickly evaporated in the blazing heat of his new shame.

Carl’s friends, Ahmad, Jack and Lee, saw him in the hall, said their hellos. Carl gestured to his throat and shook his head, grimacing.

In his next class, he said nothing, as he found himself newly afraid to speak. Halfway through class, he wrote a note explaining his throat hurt, and asking for a restroom pass. The teacher, Professor Acute, agreed without hesitation. Carl was, after all— well, Carl.

Entering the bathroom, Carl first checked the stalls to make sure he was alone. Confirming no one would hear him, he cleared his throat, took a deep breath and said, “testing. Testing.” He heard his

pretty, feminine voice echoing off the sparkling tile of the always spotless bathrooms at Carrolwood Academy. This was the first time he had heard his voice, as it were, outside his head. And, as awful as it had sounded inside his head, to hear the dainty and dulcet tones of his new voice from outside, was infinitely worse.

“What the hell?” Carl concentrated. He focused. *Talk like a guy*, he thought to himself. *Talk like a guy*. “Hey, bro,” he said, but his vocal cords had paid no attention to his mind. He still sounded like a girl. “Ugh!”

Two things then occurred to him. First, that this must be some prank that Sunni had played on him. Of course. He nodded to himself as the thought occurred, reluctantly admiring the act she had put on after class. No doubt, she had meant to throw him off the trail. The second thought, which had suddenly grown in urgency, was that he needed to relieve himself. It was, and I am afraid I must be a bit indelicate here, a #2. Therefore, Carl entered a stall and took a seat upon the commode.

As Carl took care of business, while also contemplating revenge on Sunni, the door to the bathroom swung open to the sound of squeaking hinges. There was a thud as it swung closed followed by the sound of echoing footsteps. Carl saw a pair of neatly polished leather shoes plant themselves in front of his stall. The door began to rattle, and in horror Carl saw that he had not fully closed the clasp. Terror grew. He wanted to tell whoever this was the stall was occupied, but— his voice! He couldn’t speak in this horrible voice. The clasp came free. Carl’s discomfort at having someone see him sitting on the can with his pants around his ankles overcame his newly found fear of speaking. A high-pitched little scream escaped

him as he pushed himself to his feet, slammed his hands against the door and shouted, "There's someone in here!"

A masculine laugh sounded from the other side of the door as Carl pushed the clasp back into place. "You know you're in the men's room?"

*He thinks I'm a girl?* The realization shocked Carl. He knew he sounded like a girl, but it was a new level of mortification for him to have someone think he WAS a girl. He had finished his dirty work, so he quickly did his "cleaning" even as he heard the boy walk down and open another stall door. Carl had pulled up his pants and was tucking in his shirt when the other boy asked, "Who is that? Sunni?"

Carl smiled. A little chance for revenge. "Yeah, it's Sunni" he said. "Emergency. Don't tell anyone!"

He heard the boy laugh. Carl made his escape.

Carl could not go home sick, as much as he now longed to make an escape. Indeed, he had perfect attendance going back to kindergarten, and he was not about to lose his perfect record now. Instead, he simply refused to speak, carrying around a note he'd written out explaining he had a sore throat. When lunch came, he snuck away from the cafeteria, not wanting to be around his friends, who would no doubt have heard about his "prank" in Quantum Physics. He did not want to be around people at all, and he had a more pressing need than his social life: finding a cure for whatever Sunni had done to him.

Carl made his way to the old Chemistry lab in Yarrow Hall, the oldest building on campus. Yarrow lab was now used largely for storage. Neat rows of alembics, test tubes and Bunsen burners



lined the walls—for everything at Carrolwood Academy was kept neat, clean and carefully organized, even half-forgotten equipment in an abandoned room.

Well, not abandoned. Carl and Sunni had used this lab for their private research, where they would not be disturbed by the more mundane concocting done by the smart and exceptional but not AS exceptional students. He sat down at the computer and began to research. He suspected that Sunni had used some chemical agent to tighten his vocal cords. It seemed the most likely method. Even as Carl researched, however, he found himself troubled by a confounding factor which challenged his theory. When he spoke, he had not only spoken in a higher register. In fact, his speech patterns had now the somewhat sing song delivery of a female. When he had shouted, ‘there’s someone in here’ it had not sounded precisely like the monotone delivery of a male voice pitched female. It had sounded like, “There’s SOMEONE in HERE?” With a aggressively feminine lift at the end.

No, Car decided. He must be remembering it wrong. No doubt, his perceptions had been destabilized by the change in his voice. “I’m NOT talking like a girl?” He said, instantly annoyed as he once more heard the feminine speech patterns fused with his tea kettle timbre. He shook his head. “Whatevs,” he mumbled, forcing himself to focus on his research.

Among the joys of Carl’s young life, research ranked near the top. He loved learning, and he loved getting lost in studies and data, information, speculation. He instantly found himself in a happy place, unaware of time or stress as he buried himself in scientific journals, sagely devouring the lines of dense, jargon-laden text. The

sound of footsteps racing down the hall snapped him from his reverie even as the door to the lab slammed open and Sunni charged into the room screaming, "You vile twerp!"

Carl looked up, eager to confront her, but froze, his mouth dropping open in shock. Sunni had a beard. A full, bushy Scotsman of a beard, thick and glossy to go with the handlebar mustache that curled beneath her little button nose.

"Sunni?" Carl squeaked. It was her. It was a shock, of course, to see such a pretty girl with such a massive masculine growth on her face, not least because not a single boy at the school was yet capable of such a display of pure manliness.

"Don't act all surprised!" Sunni shouted, once more putting her hands on his chest, and shoving him. "I know you did this!"

'Um, for your information?" Carl said. "I have no idea what you're talking about?"

"Stop talking like me!" Sunni said. "And FIX THIS!"

"You're the one who did this to my voice!" Carl shrieked. "So, just, take a chill pill or something."

"Me? What are you talking about?"

"I'm not doing this," Carl said. "You think I want to sound like an airhead??"

"Did you just call me an airhead?" Sunni said.

"Um, I said you SOUND like an airhead?" Carl said, unable to stop the words from sounding extra snooty.

Sunni tugged on her beard. "Something strange is going on here."

"I'm SO glad you finally figured that out!" Carl sniped back.

The bell rang. Sunni stared at Carl. Carl stared back. “Ugh!” They both said, heading for the door. They arrived at the same time, and Carl shouldered his way past Sunni, easily pushing her aside. “This isn’t over!” He called back over his shoulder, using his longer stride to easily outpace Sunni, who hurried along behind him.

He’s so tall, Sunni thought, admiring Carl’s broad shoulders, the way his body made a V-shape tapering down to his .... *Too bad he’s a jerk*, she thought. *I am so going to kill him for this!*

Her mind fixated on the moment she’d grown her beard.

She’d been at lunch with her friends. As so often was the case, the conversation had turned to the Notorious RBG. A couple of her friends were political science majors— like that was really a science — Sunni chuckled at the absurdity. Nevertheless, RBG was a woman to be admired, and it had been all going well when everyone had started to stare at Sunni. “What?” She’d said, a French fry halfway to her mouth.

“Your face,” Dani had said, pointing.

“Do I have ketchup or something?” Sunni had said, wiping at her mouth with the back of her hand only to feel stiff bristles. “What the hell?” She said, touching her chin with her fingertips, immediately pulling them away as she once more felt— hair?

Kennedy, who it must be said, was a bit vain, had been checking herself out with her smartphone. She now turned it toward Sunni who shrieked as she saw her whole lower face was now covered with a stubby five o’clock shadow more suitable to a male model. Sunni watched as the stubble grew and grew, filling out and bursting

from her face like a shrub. Within seconds, she was staring at a beard that would make a lumberjack jealous—

“Ahhhhhh!” Sunni screamed, grabbing the beard, yanking, trying to pull it off even as, adding to the absurdity, her newly grown mustache stretched out and curled into a handsome and impressive pair of handlebars.

“Omigod!” Kennedy said.

“Carl!” Sunni had shouted, leaping to her feet and bolting from the lunchroom.

Now, racing along behind him, she wondered. Could he be telling the truth? Could someone else be behind this?

But who?



## CHAPTER 2

Much like her bitter rival Carl, the thought of missing class disgusted and shamed her even more than her manly facial adornment, and she had steeled her will and forced herself to move amongst the students resplendently bearded, ignoring the comments and giggles that followed her down the hall.

To an extent, she had rejected the notion that Carl was responsible. As talented as he was, she did not believe him to be an actor capable of the performance he'd put on in the lab. More, his mocking of her voice did not seem in character for him. Then, she began to hear rumors of how a boy had caught her in the men's room, and once more she was sure that this was, indeed, some elaborate prank orchestrated by her nemesis.

As Sunni waited for her mother to pick her up after school, she contemplated texting her Mom a warning as to her beard. It seemed unlikely her mother would believe her, so she bided her time using her smart phone to perform research. Much like Carl, it was one of her passions. A honk, honk broke her concentration. She looked up to see Mom in her silver Lexus, a bemused look on her face. Sunni climbed into the car, threw her backpack into the back seat and pulled the seat belt across her chest. Her beard got caught under the belt, and she pulled it free, grunting with annoyance.

Mom smiled. It was a quizzical, bemused smile. She raised an eyebrow. It was an invitation for an explanation. Sunni smiled. Mom started to put the car into gear, then stopped. "Um, you look nice," Mom said.

‘It’s for a show,” Sunni said, grateful for the improv class she’d taken sophomore year. “I’m going to be playing .... A pirate. It’s Pirates of Penzance. I need to get in character.” In fact, the drama department was putting on Pirates of Penzance, though Sunni had actually been cast as Mabel. Of course.

“A pirate!” Mom gushed, always eager to support her daughter. “How interesting.” She started to put the car in gear. Stopped. “But, do you have to wear the beard *all* the time?”

Sunni put her hands up. ‘It’s my method,” she said.

The car behind them politely honked. The Carrolwood parents were quite polite at all times. It was just a tiny little bit of a honk. The automobile version of, “hey, girl.”

“Argh!” Sunni said, putting on a raspy voice. “Better raise the main sail and get this wreck moving, lassie!”

Mom put the car in gear and pulled out. “You make such a cute pirate!” She said.

“Watch who you call cute, missy!” Sunni said, getting into the role. “You’ll be takin’ a trip to Davey Jones’ locker!”

“My little pirate!” Mom said, turning her attention to the road. ‘I can’t wait to see the play!”

“Operetta,” Sunni corrected her. Sunni was sometimes quite particular about being precise with her language. In any case, relieved that her mother had ended this line of questioning, she smoothed her skirt and then pushed her hand under her mighty beard, scratching her chin. Beards, she realized, were a bit itchy in addition to being completely inappropriate for a girl. Not, of course, that Sunni was bound by gender norms. She just thought she looked cuter with a smooth face.

At dinner, Sunni's father seemed disturbed by Sunni's thriving facial growth. He watched as she carefully slipped her food under her mustache, or when she, without even thinking, grabbed the base of her beard and used it like a napkin to wipe her lips. 'It's glued on pretty well, isn't it?'

"Amazing new adhesive," Sunni said. 'I've never seen anything like it.'

"It's a little off putting," Dad said. "Maybe you can take it off for dinner?"

"It's her method," Mom said.

"Actors," Dad said. "I'll never understand them."

"We're weird," Sunni agreed. "And don't get me started on pirates. Yargh!"

After dinner, Sunni went back to her room and closed the door, sighing with relief. She didn't know how long she could keep this act up. She needed to get rid of the beard. Despite what the evidence suggested, she decided to try shaving it off, reasoning that perhaps whatever chemical agent Carl had used to stimulate her follicles had a time limit of some sort. But no. Even as she filled her sink with thick, curly hair, she watched in the mirror as her beard sprouted anew. 'Puzzling,' she said.

Going back to her room, she resolved to more research. But first, she decided to make one more attempt with Carl. She got out her phone. "One chance. Send me the cure or things will get worse for you."

"You fix my voice" Carl texted back, followed by a string of emojis which seemed to mean nothing.



Sunni thought, toying with her mustache, curling the end around her little finger.

For now, Carl had had an easier time of it. Most of the kids at school had thought he'd been putting on the voice in class to tease Sunni. For the rest of the day, he'd simply shown people his sign saying he'd lost his voice. The same tactic had worked with his parents, though it had taken some effort and a lot of writing to convince them not to take him to the doctor. He'd actually been able to almost forget about it as he'd studied in his room, then had gone to take a shower. Studies came first, and he had fought off the urge to continue researching his vocal predicament, as he had a big test coming up in biology, as well as a book report in Super Advanced Elite College Prep English. As he soaped up, he started to sing, as was his habit, not even conscious of his high-pitched voice while he rapped:

Got a big gun gonna get some fine bitches...

In fact, so distracted and lost in thought was he that he actually found himself admiring how clear and pretty his voice sounded, bouncing back to him with the gentle echo of the bathroom.

Wearing a push up bra and a miniskirt...

He stopped, jarred that he had changed the words from "strap on my guns and an extra clip" to "push up bra and a miniskirt..." even as his boyish shame rushed over him as he suddenly became aware of

not just his voice, but how he'd once again taken any masculine edge off the articulation, singing it cute, more like a cheer chant than anything a male would ever do.

"What's wrong with me?" He whispered, once again flinching at how feminine he sounded. He toweled off and put his bathrobe on, opened the door and froze. His younger brother, Dan, was standing there, staring at him curiously.

"I thought you lost your voice?" He said.

Carl nodded, even as he felt himself blushing. He gestured toward his throat and shook his head.

"Then how come I heard you singing like a girl?"

Carl made a face and walked away. *Omigod. He knows!*

"Mom!" Dan called as he ran down the hall. "Carl sounds like a girl!"

*I hate my little bro sometimes!* Carl thought, humiliated. He almost ran after him to shut him up, but instead he just went to his room and closed the door, his heart racing. He would just deny it. In writing. His Mom wouldn't believe Dan. It was ridiculous. Carl sounding like a girl? Even if it was true.

But, Dan had something over him now, which Carl did not like. Three years older, he'd always been bigger and stronger than little bro. It was his privilege as the older bro to, let's say, wrestle with his younger brother and remind him who was boss. Oh, very well, let me put it more bluntly. Carl would sometimes beat up his little brother in a show of dominance, a habit not uncommon among male siblings of the human species. Dan had experienced a growth spurt during his 14th year, and his lanky, youthful body had begun to bulk and bulge

with muscle. Carl, still taller and stronger, could still pin him, but it was beginning to take a lot more effort than ever before. In their eternal struggle for dominance and parental approval, Dan seemed to be catching up, and he knew it. Carl sounding like a cheerleader would not help him to maintain his position as boss boy in the house.

As Carl mulled his problems with Dan, his phone buzzed, and he and Sunni exchanged texts. This exchange having been related in the previous narrative passage, there is no need to return to it now. When he was finished, he put the phone down, sighing prettily. Then, he threw himself back into his research, falling asleep with his smart pad in his hands.

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Sunni's parents were in bed, each one reading by the bed lights. "I don't know what to make of the beard," Dad said.

"She's playing a pirate," Mom said. "It's for a play."

Dad nodded. "I find her kind of intimidating now," he admitted.

Mom patted him on the hand. "You're still the man of the house, dear."

"I'm thinking of growing a beard."

"Whatever you need to do," Mom said, turning off her reading lamp and pulling on her eye covers. "Whatever you need to do."



### CHAPTER 3.

Sunni combed out her beard in the morning, disgusted to see crumbs scattering on the bottom of the sink. *Gross*, she thought.

After, she brushed her long, luxurious, silky hair. She loved the way the light shone off her hair as she worked the brush through it, her tresses pouring down over her slender shoulders like water. In truth, Sunni was a very attractive young woman. The other girls often remarked at how unfair it was that she was so smart and so pretty. Sunni's long, beautiful hair was a point of pride with her, and she cared for it with the same care and attention a loving mother would give to a newborn baby, using all manner of lotions and oils. Even the food she ate was chosen with care to maximize the benefit to her skin and hair.

She knew the girls called her lucky. Lucky? She scoffed. They had no idea the effort she put into herself. Of course, that was partly because whenever she was asked for her secrets, she always said, "It just grows like this," in a breezy, offhand manner.

Hair brushed, she fixed it with barrettes and hair pins, carefully sculpting it to look carefree and natural, while also keeping her long bangs out of her eyes.

When she went downstairs for breakfast, she found Dad in his business suit looking scruffy. He was usually clean shaven, considering it a mark of professionalism in the lawyerly world. "Letting it grow out?" Sunni said, strangely interested in her father's facial hair.

Dad chuckled. ‘Yeah. I figured why not grow a beard for the winter? Hahaha. Something different.’

“It makes you look more masculine,” Sunni said. “You *should* grow it.”

Dad sat back. Was this his daughter talking to him? Her comment about looking more masculine stung. Had he looked—effeminate before? In any case, it sealed the deal. He was definitely growing a beard. He couldn’t let his little girl out-manly him.

Carl stood at the mirror, looking himself over for any signs of additional change. As an athlete, he hit the weights pretty hard, and he was pleased to see his angular, hard body seemed unchanged. He flexed his bulging biceps, hunched over and flexed his shoulders. *Nope. Still all studly*, he thought. He touched the thin little patch of curly hairs growing on the center of his chest. Lifted his arms and admired the dusting of armpit hair. He checked his balls.

Yup. Still all there. He leaned close to the mirror and examined the thin suggestion of a mustache that had appeared on his upper lip overnight, just like always. It was more a wisp, or a shadow, but it was something. Normally, he shaved it off because he thought it made him look like a dork, but today he decided to keep it. Remind everyone he was a dude. In case they, like, forgot.

To his relief, Dan seemed to have forgotten all about the singing incident. He was too busy eating and playing Fortnite to be his usual annoying self. Carl’s Mom was full of ominous foreboding, as she made it very clear that he **WOULD** see a doctor about his throat. Carl pretended to be okay with it, giving her a hug and a thumbs up, but he was thinking, “*As If.*”

School was hell. Not due to any lingering effects of his vocal performance the previous day. Life moved fast in the hyper-connected world of Carrolwood Academy. The minor little incident of him making fun of Sunni's voice had already been eclipsed by all the latest news about who was seen kissing who, who was breaking up, who was together, whose parents were getting a divorce.... And on and on and on. In the connected world, news that would have taken a week to spread around campus in the more genteel days of old, now whizzed around the world in mere hours. The gossip line had become a 24-hour news cycle, and even the great mystery of Sunni's beard had largely played out.

No, it was not the gossip and inane chatter which made for Carl's living hell. It was remaining silent. Carl was, as we have seen, always with his hand up, eager to answer every question posed. It was, as those of us who are not among the Carl's of the world know, quite annoying, even for the teachers, who longed to engage more than one student. However, of course, they forgave even this little peccadillo as Carl was so smart and handsome and charismatic it was impossible not to see even his small faults, eventually, as delightful. And so, in first period history class, when the teacher asked for a volunteer to explain the Holly-Smoot Tariff Act, Carl fought against years of habit, his whole body shaking as he kept his hands under his desk, clawed together as he strained not to raise his hand and answer what was a ridiculously easy question.

"Anyone? Anyone?" Doctor Ben asked, looking around the room. "Anyone? Anyone?"

The class sat in silence; eyes averted.

*Come on!* Carl thought to himself. *It's, like, so obvs?*

Having paused an awkwardly long time and processed his disappointment at the class sitting there mute in the face of something they should have just read about for homework, Dr. Ben let his eyes go to Carl, and they filled with a need, a need for Carl to come to the rescue as he so often did. Dr. Ben, as it were, had taken a seminar some years before in which he had learned that if a teacher answers his own questions, he will train his students to simply wait for him to get around to it. So, he had a firm policy to never answer his own questions. Which meant Carl needed to do it. “Carl?” He finally asked, voice full of hope.

Carl was shaking, straining with the effort to keep his hand down, to keep from blurting out the answer in his sing song voice. He shook his head. Held up the sign he’d made and SHOWN TO Dr. Ben before class explaining how he’d LOST HIS VOICE.

“Oh, yes. You’ve lost your voice. I forgot.” Dr. Ben collapsed into the chair behind his desk. He waved toward the students in defeat. “Read chapter three. You obviously need to review the material. Quiz the last ten minutes.”

The class groaned. “Thanks a lot,” Ahmed hissed from the next row over.

Carl sank down in his chair. He was not the guy who let people down. He KNEW the answer, but he could not speak.

Quantum Math was worse. Sunni answered every question. Seeing Carl sitting there, quiet as a mouse, she’d even taunted him, waiting to raise her hand, watching him shake with the strain of keeping his mouth shut. At one point, she’d even raised her hand, and when the teacher called on her, she’d pretended to reconsider.



“You know, this is really more Carl’s area. Carl, you want to handle this?”

Carl glared at her, shaking his head. He held up his sign.

“Oh, that’s right. You lost your voice. My, my. Well, I am sure he doesn’t actually know the answer. Probably didn’t even study.”

Carl, outraged at the suggestion he had failed to study, almost spoke, but the shame of his perky piping held him back. He made a fist. The teacher stepped in, admonishing Sunni, who went on the answer the question, reveling in her performance.

After class, Carl was at his locker when Sunni sidled up to him. “I like the new you,” she said. “Se meek and quiet. It really suits you.”

Carl glanced around to make sure no one else was in earshot, then leaned down and hissed. “At least I don’t have a beard!” He sounded just like any mean girl.

“At least I don’t have a beard,” Sunni squeaked back, mocking him.

“Ugh!” Carl slammed his locker and walked away.

Sunni watched him, once more admiring his shape. He worked out, and it showed. Clearly, though, the voice thing was real, which meant— someone else was behind all this. But who?

Both Carl and Sunni spent the day pondering the author of their misfortune. It had become clear they were not each other’s nemeses in this case. It had also become clear that whatever science had been used to alter their bodies was not commonly known to — well, science. Someone at their school had made a breakthrough. Now, it may seem unlikely that a mere student would invent something so groundbreaking and incredible. You must

remember, dear reader, that Carrolwood populated itself with only the most extraordinary pupils. Indeed, rare was the student who graduated without owning at least one patent, and most had also published their first works before their 12th grade year. So, it is no leap of logic for our two protagonists to suspect a fellow student. Nor would it be an easy task to narrow the list of suspects.

It was during soccer practice that the next changes occurred. As enlightened and forward thinking, indeed, even as progressive as Carrolwood Academy accounted itself, it was a school that still engaged in what was clearly and undeniably sexist behavior. Specifically, since the school had but one soccer field, it was given to the boys to hold their practices on the actual soccer field. The girls were relegated to the outfield of the softball stadium, which was not a terrible location, but was most certainly less. Indeed, Sunni and the other girls had approached the school during their first year at Carrolwood and presented an argument for field access equality.

The school had promised to form a committee which would examine the issue and get back to them. The committee had been meeting ever since without reaching any conclusion other than to say the issue needed “further study.” Tradition, you see, was much valued at Carrolwood, and it stood as a mighty dam, holding back the waters of progress. ‘Isn’t it enough,” some of the older trustees would ask amongst themselves, “that we allowed girls to come here in the first place?”

Oh, did I forget to mention that Carrolwood had started off as an all-male school? It must have slipped my mind. Yes, given that Carrolwood was founded in 1747, some years before America itself

emerged from the blood and thunder of the revolutionary war, it can be little surprise that initially it was open only to males. Carrolwood did and does still maintain a sister school for ladies. Songbird Gardens. You've probably heard of it. There, young ladies were taught to paint china, host parties, to walk and sit, these skills being quite unknown to the typical young lady of the day, who found the act of walking quite perplexing.

It was in 1967, a full 220 years after its founding, that Carrolwood admitting its first class of co-eds, with much fanfare, announcing this "extraordinary young ladies would be treated as full and equal partners in learning." Of course, they weren't.

Because, tradition.

But, I digress. I'm afraid I could go on and on about the shade of sexism that lingers among the ivy-covered gothic halls of good ole Wood. Instead, allow me to point out two other facts which will become quite relevant to dear Carl and sweet Sunni. One, the Carrolwood teams continued the tradition of having different names for the boys' and girls' teams. The boys were known as The Hawks. The girls as the Lady Hawks. Many schools have done away with this practice, having come to the conclusion that it was possible to just call all the teams the same name. For example, and please try to follow along as this may seem quite absurd, if the boys' teams were known as The Spartans, the girls' teams were also called—The Spartans. Carrolwood did not follow this tradition for a simple reason, which due to some legal concerns was never put in writing. That reason is this: girls must be reminded that even should they exert themselves in athletic competition, they are yet expected to be ladies.

Another reminder for the girls that they were in fact girls, came in the form of everyday school uniforms. The girls were required to wear skirts and blouses. In addition, they wore adorable little ascots, as it was believed ties were too masculine and might lead to confusion should these poor, delicate females be forced to wear something clearly meant only for men.

Now, history lesson complete, I return to the boys' soccer field, where the manly hawks practiced in preparation to crush any and all who dared stand before them. Carl, indeed, found himself standing before his arch-rival, and the second best boy on the team, Matt Manning.

Face smeared with mud from an earlier spill, eyes blazing with intensity, Matt deadened a long, arcing pass from his goalie that put him and the ball behind the defense of the white shirts— Carl's unit. There were only three people on this end of the field— Matt, Carl, and Ahmed, the goalie. The word most often used to describe Matt was an athlete was EXPLOSIVE. And he dribbled the ball forward with lightning quickness. Carl felt himself tense, his mind laser focused on Matt, on the ball. He knew Matt had a bad habit of always trying to pass around a defender to the right, and so he moved, seeing it all play out in his mind, how he would steal the ball, make Matt look like a fool and..

Suddenly Carl couldn't see as thick, lustrous bangs flopped into his eyes. "What?" He squeaked, trying to move where he'd expected Matt to be, kicking at open air as he felt Matt rush past him. Carl was so shocked and thrown off balance that he actually

spun and tumbled to the ground, his now long, silky blonde hair falling over his supine form like a blanket.

He heard shouts. Rolling onto his side, he parted his hair like a curtain and looked to see Matt celebrating, his team running to high five, as Ahmed sat on his knees, hands in the air. The soccer ball spun around inside the goal. Carl climbed to his feet, struggling to toss the long hair that now poured down over his shoulders and back out of his face. “What the hell?” Coach Blaser shouted. “What the holy hell?”

Carl shrugged. Matt ran by him laughing. “Nice hair, Carli!” He shouted.

The rest of practice was one long embarrassment for Carl. His bangs kept flopping in his eyes, his hair felt like it weighed ten pounds, and it kept swirling around him, flying into his face and mouth, bouncing around as he ran. The guys, picking up on Matt’s taunt, started calling him Carli. Finally, coach pulled him out. “You and Sunni need to settle this,” Coach said. “Hit the locker. You look ridiculous out there.”

Carl wanted to explain, to plead his case. But, his voice? He dared not speak. He just nodded and jogged back to the locker room, head bowed in shame, one hand holding back his bangs.

The Ladyhawks had also elected to hold a scrimmage. The losing squad would have to run ten laps around the stadium. They were tied one to one, with time running out. If the scrimmage ended in a tie, everyone would have to run. Sunni was not having that. Running more laps was nothing, but she hated losing. “Huddle up! Huddle up!” She shouted. Her girls gathered around her in a perfect circle. They practiced doing everything to perfection.

“Maybe we should...” Mallory started.

“No,” Sunni said. “This is what we’re going to do.” She outlined a play. Told everyone exactly where to be and what to do. “On three! One! Two! Three!” They all shouted, “Lady Hawks” and broke, Sunni running to the sideline to pass the ball in.

“I feel like I have to do whatever she says,” Kennedy said as she and Mallory took their positions on the other side of the field.

“It’s beard power,” Mallory agreed. “I can’t say no to the beard.”

“She even makes a beard work,” Kennedy sighed.

“That’s Sunni.”

Sunni passed the ball to their best striker, Jane. She attacked the middle of the field, and just as Sunni had anticipated, the defense for the blue squad collapsed on her. Jane kicked the ball all the way to the sideline, where Kennedy headed it to Mallory who’d taken off for the goal. She kicked it hard, bending it like Beckham, and the ball flew just past the fingertips of the diving goalie, who slammed to the turf in a cloud of dust just as the clock expired.

The girls on the winning squad squealed and jumped up and down, then froze as a roar like an angry bear echoed across the field. They looked over at Sunni, who stood with her eyes wide, her hand to her throat. “Oh, man,” Sunni said, her voice sounding like it should be coming from a 6’ 6” three-hundred-pound man. “No way! No way!”

Though both Carl and Sunni had concluded they were not to blame for what was happening, the rest of the school had come to the conclusion that they were. Consequently, Sunni’s friends huddled around her in the locker room and showered her with

sisterly support. “Carl is such a jerk! I can’t believe he would even do this to you! Want us to get him?”

“I’ll a get him back,” Sunni rumbled, grossed out that she sounded like a man. “Don’t worry about it.”

“You’re so brave.”

Was it true, dear reader, that some of those girls secretly enjoyed seeing Sunni suffer? Well, let it be said we are dealing with humans, and teen-agers, and there is always envy among them towards their betters. Yes, they all admired Sunni, and indeed, they longed to be close to her, to warm themselves in the light of her bright soul. But they also enjoyed seeing her brought down a peg or two. More than a few enjoyed the smug thought that as long as this remained her reality, Sunni would not have a boyfriend. Sunni, you see, had decided she wanted to be free for her last summer of high-school, so she’d broken up with Heath— they really weren’t getting along anyway— planning to find a new boy to cuddle for her senior year. Those plans were now— on pause.

While Sunni’s friends were supportive, Carl’s friends, on the other hand, were boys. “Looking good, Carli! You should be a shampoo model!” Normally, Carl would answer every jibe with one of his own. But, alas, as we all know, he’d lost his voice, or at least a voice he was willing to use, so he suffered in silence, making a quick exit from the locker room, his hair swaying as he walked away to face the next impending dilemma: theater practice.

Sunni, too, made her way to theater practice, testing her voice, trying to find a higher placement, to reclaim her glassy soprano.

Much like poor Carl the day before, she found it impossible. All that came from her were manly rumblings. Skipping practice was not an option for either of these over-achievers. Indeed, I must remind the reader, that since they shared the same perfect GPA, it would be their extra-curriculums that won the day. As Sunni walked, she noticed a tall girl in front of her with long hair that trailed halfway down her back. The girl caught her attention because her hair was as pretty and impressive as Sunni's own— or, almost as pretty. In addition, this girl was wearing trousers, a bold statement that impressed and annoyed Sunni at the same time. She must be a freshman, Sunni thought, as she had never seen this girl before, and she decided she needed to find out who this daring young feminist was, who dared to defy the school and wear pants.

Sunni hurried he step, ran up beside the girls and gasped. "Carl?"

Carl stopped and looked down at her. He still had one hand in his hair, holding it out of his eyes. The sound of that deep, bear-like voice coming from Sunni shocked him. Glancing to make sure no one was around, he shook his head, his silky hair flowing around his face like water. "Your voice changed, too?" He asked.

"You could say that," Sunni said, reaching out and touching his hair. It was so soft! "And you have my hair."

"So, um, like, I know you're so not doing this," Carl said.

'Yeah. Same here. We need to figure who is. Meet me after practice.'

"Kay," Carl said, surrendering to the power of the beard.

"You look pretty," Sunni said, surprised as the words came out of her mouth.

Carl giggled, immediately covering his mouth with his hand.



"This is too weird," Sunni said. "I don't know what I'm saying. See you later." She walked away.

Carl hurried after. "What are you going to tell Mrs. Calloway?"

"That I want to be a pirate," Sunni said. "It's the story I've been going with my parents anyway."

"I'm sticking with lost my voice for now," Carl said. "I can't play a *boy* sounding like this?"

"Maybe you should play Emma," Sunni said. "You have the voice for her."

"Don't be a smart ass," Carl said.

"Just busting your balls," Sunni said, shocked even as the words left her mouth. "I can't stop talking like a guy."

Carl just tossed his hair and sighed.

The auditorium buzzed with all the boys and girls who were in the play. Some warmed up their voices, others flirted or chatted. Carl watched from offstage as Sunni went right up to Mrs. Calloway and the two started talking. He couldn't hear what they said, but Mrs. Calloway nodded, seemed concerned, then supportive. Carl couldn't help but check out Mrs. Calloway's tight, curvy body. Only 25 and right out of college, she was a dancer and kept herself fit. She had a dancer's booty, which after school for rehearsal she displayed in tight little pairs of jeans. It was probably wrong, but he often fantasized that she would ask him to stay after school, and they'd end up together, kissing and stripping off each other's clothes.

As Carl let his mind drift off into blissfully fantasy, he idly toyed with his hair, curling it around his fingers. Then, Sunni and Mrs. Calloway looked toward him, Sunni gesturing and explaining. Carl's heart began to pound. *No. No*, he thought. *Don't rat me out!*

Mrs. Calloway walked over, smiling. Carl felt himself shrinking in shame as her eyes played across his long hair. He took his hand away from his bangs, and they fluttered down over his right eye. Trying to act casual, he crossed his arms and raised his chin. He was sure Sunni had told Mrs. Calloway all about his silly new voice, and he would refuse to talk. Stick to his story.

“Sunni tells me you lost your voice?” Mrs. Calloway said, looking up at him.

Carl slumped in relief.

Mrs. Calloway idly reached up and brushed his bangs from his eyes, “She told me about the hair, too. You poor thing.”

Having Mrs. Calloway brush his hair back made Carl feel both a little lightheaded and a little feminine, neither of which feeling he enjoyed. Mrs. Calloway continued to play with his hair as she talked. “You can just walk through today. Alec needs the practice anyway, so he can sing your part.”

Carl nodded. He so desperately wanted to push Mrs. Calloway’s hand away from his hair, but he knew it would be rude. “Your hair is really pretty,” Mrs. Calloway said with a little smile before walking away.

Carl wanted to vomit. He did not want his teacher crush telling him he had pretty hair. Once rehearsal started, he just walked the Pirate King’s staging, learning his positions for different scenes. Alec, his understudy, walked with him, singing the parts while Carl watched. At one point, when the pirates were with the Major General’s daughters, Kennedy started to run her hands through his hair. It just seemed girls couldn’t help themselves. Carl pretended it didn’t bother him.

Sunni sang the pirate parts. Her voiced boomed across the theater. She had the most powerful voice of anyone in the cast, and Carl seethed with envy.



## CHAPTER 4.

JUMP CUT! Later. After Theater Rehearsal!

We leap now to the abandoned science lab. Let me set the scene: Carl sits perched on a stool, his long hair draped around him like a veil. From his six foot two and still manly frame, the voice of tinker bell chirps. It is quite disconcerting, for it does not seem such a fully feminine voice could possibly from such a large male. Sunni perches on the lab table next to him, her long hair tied back in a ponytail, but just as long and pretty as his. A massive fern of a beard sprouts from her chin, trailing halfway down her chest, and an equally unlikely voice booms from her petite frame.

They have just arrived and are engaged in a ritual greeting.

"You're such an idiot," Carl sneers.

"At least I'm not scared to even talk," Sunni thunders back.

"You would be if you sounded like this," Carl says.

"I sounded like that until just a few hours ago," Sunni said.

"Um, you're a girl?" Carl said. "You're supposed to sound like a girl? Duh?"

Sunni chuckled. It sounded like gravel moving around in her chest. "You talk exactly like a girl now."

"It's sooo embarrassing!"

Sunni reached out and started playing with his hair. "Stop!" Carl squeaked, slapping her hand away. "Everyone keeps touching my hair! It's, like, not cool."

"It's so pretty," Sunni said, a little embarrassed. "So shiny."

“What are we going to do?” Carl finally snapped, eager to change the subject from how pretty and shiny his hair was.

“We need to find out who’s doing this,” Sunni said. “Someone is making these changes. It has to be someone at this school.”

“Someone with a grudge,” Carl agreed. His bangs had once more fallen across his eye, and he brushed them back, only for them to drop right back into place, sweeping over his right eye completely.

“Someone also,” Sunni said, “with the capability.” Seeing Carl’s struggle with his bangs, she reached up and plucked one of her barrettes from her own hair. “Which is where I have run into a wall.” She started to fuss with Carl’s hair, meaning to clip his hair back and out of his eyes.

“Stop!” He squealed, once more pushing her hand away.

“This will keep your hair out of your eyes,” Sunni explained. “Though I do have to admit you look sexy as hell with that hair all in your face.”

“Jerk,” Carl said. “Fine.”

“Sit still. Chin up.”

Carl did as he was told, and Sunni fixed the barrette in his hair. It amused her to see the girly little hair accessory sparkling in Carl’s hair, and she unleashed a rumbling chuckle. “You look adorable.”

Carl just through up his hands. “At least I can see?”

“So, I was saying I ran into a wall.”

“We don’t know HOW this is being done, so we can’t narrow the suspects based on skillset?” Carl said.

“Bingo,” Sunni said. “I can’t find a scientific explanation.”

“Which leaves...” Carl started, and they finished together, “magic.”

“You’re thinking magic, too,” Sunni said.

“When you, like, eliminate the impossible...” Carl said.

“ONCE you eliminate the impossible,” Sunni corrected.

“Whatever remains, however impossible, must be the truth.”

“You sure it’s once?” Carl said.

“I’m sure.”

“I think you’re wrong,” Carl said, not able to keep a mischievous giggle from escaping his lips.

“Bet?” Sunni said. They had been having bets like this for years.

“Bet,” Carl said. “If you lose, you have to... braid your beard. And come to school that way tomorrow.”

“Oh. Okay. And if you lose, you have to come to school tomorrow— with halo braids.”

“I don’t even know what that means,” Carl said.

“Well, you better hope you win, doll face.” Sunni grimaced.

“These dumb boy things keep coming out of my mouth.”

“Maybe they’re just dumb *GIRL* things,” Carl said in a snotty voice.

“Let’s see...”. Sunni did a search with her phone. Laughed, a big, booming laugh that rattled the test tubes. She held the phone towards Carl, who whimpered in frustration. “Once! In your face!” Sunni bellowed.

“I don’t know how to braid my hair!” Carl whined.

“Ask your Mom,” Sunni said. “I’m sure she’d love to teach her *son* how to braid his long, pretty hair!”

“And we’re talking about my hair again.”

“Better than your voice,” Sunni grumbled.

Carl thought. “Agreed.”

“Anyway, here’s the plan. We go see Dr. Reilly tomorrow. She’s the head of the Wiccan Club. She may have some answers.”

“Okay,” Carl said.

“What, you’re just going to agree without an argument?”

“It’s something about that beard,” Carl said, his voice getting smaller and higher. “You just look so... um... commanding?”

“Hmmm,” Sunni said, snatching her neck under the beard.

“Well, maybe there is an advantage to this after all. I actually kind of felt like my Dad was a little scared of me.”

“Can I touch it?” Carl asked, still using that extra small, extra high voice.

“Knock yourself out.”

Carl touched the thick hair with his fingertips. “Stiff. But, soft at the same time.”

“Yeah. A conundrum.” Her eyes went to the pitiful little growth on Carl’s lip. “What’s that you got going on your lip? Did you drink some chocolate milk at lunch?”

“Omigod,” Carl said, feeling emasculated as he compared his pitiful facial growth to Sunni’s. Of course, to briefly interrupt, dear reader, Carl was feeling emasculated in other ways as well, with the way his Barbie doll voice contrasted with Sunni’s thunder...etc... It was just that having her draw his attention to his sad lack of facial growth had deepened his feelings that he was the girl in their relationship now. “I know. I should probably shave it off, right?”

“There is no probably,” Sunni said. “Get rid of it. My Mom will be here to pick me up soon. I gotta go.” She hopped off the table.



“I have a doctor’s appointment,” Carl said as he stood, his hair swooshing behind him. “My Mom wants me to get my voice checked out.”

“Maybe they’ll find something useful,” Sunni said, heading toward the door. Just as she was about to leave, she turned back and made a gun with her thumb and index finger. “Be good, babe.”

With that, she left. Carl struggled to get his backpack on. This hair was proving a major pain. It kept getting in the way when he tried to sling the pack over his shoulders, strands getting caught in the straps and pulling painfully on his scalp. Finally, he just leaned to one side, letting all his hair fall in that direction, and slipped the backpack over the other shoulder. He felt triumphant when he straightened up, the backpack safely hooked over one shoulder, his hair not tangled and ouchy. “Yes!” He squeaked, pumping a fist in the air. “I got this!”

When Carl got to his car, he decided to warn his Mom. He got out his phone. “Just a heads up,” he typed, adding a row of smiley face emojis. He couldn’t seem to stop himself. He just had to emoji. He pressed SEND.

“Someone played a prank on me. Frowny face emojis.”

Send.

Taking a deep breath, facing his fear, he took a selfie. Glanced at it. The hair on his left was draped over the front of his shoulder, so his Mom would see the long hair for sure. SEND.

He started his car. Just as he was started to pull out of the school driveway, his phone buzzed. He put his car in park and looked at the message from his Mom. It was one word. “Blonde?” Carl groaned and covered his eyes.

“Was it Sunni?” Mom asked as they drove to the doctor’s.

Carl pointed to his throat.

“Oh. Of course. No voice,” Mom said.

The car was silent. Tension built. It was unbearable.

Carl decided it was time to tell the truth. “I can actually talk,” he said, disgusted to hear his little girl voice here in the car, talking to his mother, of all people. Carl jerked forward, grateful for his seatbelt as Mom slammed on the brakes.

“What? Is that? Did Sunni do that?”

Carl and Sunni had agreed to stick to the widely believed but false story that they were pranking each other. “Yeah, but, um, I pranked her, too.”

“You sound like a little girl!”

“Mom!”

“This is too much!” Mom said, pressing the gas pedal a little too hard, sending Carl slamming back into the seat. “This is beyond a simple prank! I’m going to call her parents!”

“Omigod! Mom! Don’t?” Carl said, hating the tea kettle rage in his ridiculous voice.

“I most certainly will! Giving you long hair! Making you sound like -- like an airhead!”

“I totally do not sound like an airhead!” Carl squealed.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t. It’s just. I am very upset.”

“Please. Let us work out it. Besides. She has a beard and sounds like Terry Crews.”

“A beard?” Mom said.

“A beard.”

“Well, that’s too far on your part. Too far.”

Eventually, Mom agreed to let Carl handle the situation, but said he better handle it NOW. They went to the doctor, as his voice was still off if not gone, and both of them hoped the doctor could do something. Carl was doubtful. His research suggested there was little that medical science could do in his case. But, why not see?

Dr. Janet Mulligoway was pretty, which made talking to her in his little girl voice all the more humiliating. “And you say this just started a couple days ago?” Dr. J asked.

“Trust me doctor. He had a voice any boy would be proud of. He was quite manly,” Mom said.

“Mom!” Carl said.

“Is that right?”

“Yeah,” Carl said. “At least the part about me sounding like a regular guy.”

“Let’s take a look.” The doctor looked. Took some scans. In the old days, there would have been a delay as the scans— X-rays or what have you— were processed. But now, they immediately appeared on a flat screen TV. “Interesting,” Dr. J said, stepping up to the screen. “Most interesting. You say this started just a couple days ago.”

“Yeah,” Carl said. “What is it?”

“Your vocal folds are tiny,” she said, pointing toward the image. “Linear convergence of the glottis. You said this was a prank?”

“That’s right, doctor,” Mom said.

“Well, I don’t know of any way to explain it then.”

“Explain what, exactly?” Carl said.

“The structure of the vocal apparatus in men and women is not the same. This accounts for differences in male and female voices.” She pointed to the image. “This is the biological vocal structure of a female.”

“You mean?” Mom said.

“Your son sounds like a girl, because he has the vocal apparatus of a girl.”

“How could this happen?”

“That’s the most puzzling part. It’s like asking how a knee can turn into an elbow. The answer, to the limits of my knowledge, is, it can’t,” Doctor J said.

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“You know, honey,” Mom said as they were driving home. “It’s great that you go to this school filled with all the geniuses and so on, but sometimes it would be nice if you just went to a regular school.”

“Tell me about it,” Carl said. “Oh, that reminds me. I lost a bet with Sunni. Unrelated. Can you teach me how to do halo braids?”

“Halo braids? My son wants halo braids?”

“I don’t want them! Omigod! I lost a bet?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t make such silly bets.”

“Can you please help me?”

“We’ll start right after dinner.”

“The gam is on—”

“It will take hours, darling. Right. After. Dinner.”

“Okay!” Carl said. “God!”

“Don’t you sass me, young lady!”

The car was silent. “Did you just call me *young lady*?”

“I forgot. You sound like a girl.” Mom said.

Carl covered his face with his hands. He needed to get this fixed. And fast. It was too embarrassing. He couldn't even!

Once they got home, Dan went wild. He snuck up behind Carl and yanked his hair, running away as Carl shrieked. "You twerp!" Carl was done hiding his voice from his family, though he quickly regretted the decision as Dan added that to the teasing. "Tinker Bell called. She wants her voice back!"

"Idiot!" Carl snapped back.

Finally, Carl knew he needed to reset their relationship. He went to the backyard and sat down on a swing hanging from the old, rusty swings they had since they'd been little. Kicking his legs, he started to rock back and forth. His hair flowed behind him, air swirling under it. It tickled his neck as it settled on the backswing. He heard Dan coming, waited, and just as Dan had gotten close enough to pull his hair, Carl leapt off the swing, his hair floating around him like a cloud. Dan bolted. Carl, still bigger and stronger, ran him down.

Carl tackled him, then quickly twisted his arm behind his back. "Ow! I give. I give!"

Carl, his hair hanging down around his face like a curtain, twisted harder. "Say you're my bitch!" Carl said, the words sounding ridiculous to him in his fey voice. Nevertheless, he persisted. "Say you're my bitch you little shit!"

"Okay! Okay!" Dan yelled. "I'm your bitch. Now, stop!"

"You pull my hair one more time, or you say anything about my voice, I'll break it next time!" Carl screamed. "You hear me?"

"Okay. Okay. Okay."

Carl slowly let him up, keeping a firm grip on Dan's arm. Then, he punched his hard on the shoulder. "Don't mess with me!"

He let go. Dan ran off. Carl tossed his hair triumphantly, dusted his hands. *Just needed to remind him whose queen bee around here*, he thought. *Mess with this bitch, gonna get clawed.*

Carl was only vaguely disturbed by his word choice. Not because he failed to recognize how utterly lacking in masculinity were his words, but because he was starting to accept that, for now, there was nothing he could do about it.

"I don't much care for this role playing," Dad said, standing in front of their stone fireplace, packing his pipe. "I liked my little girl pre-pirate."

"Gender bending is all the rage," Sunni grumbled. "This is going to be great for getting me into Harvard."

"She actually invented a chemical to make her voice deep like that," Mom said. "That's impressive, right honey?"

Dad had never been self-conscious about his voice. It was a good, solid, male voice. However, now comparing it to the voice of his little girl, he thought he sounded nasal, a little high pitched. He placed it lower in his chest. "Quite," he said. "She always has been a smart one."

"Why are you talking like that?" Mom said, amused.

"I always talked like this," Dad said. "What do you mean?"

Sunni gave her mom a look. They both saw it. Male insecurity. It was so exhausting constantly building them up. "Give me a hug, Daddy," she said, meaning for it to be one of her patented "you're my dad and I love you" moments. Instead, it sounded like she was giving him orders. She stepped forward. Dad opened his arms and gave her a hug. Sunni was short enough that her bristly beard

pressed against his chest, thankfully, or he would have probably felt the need to go outside and chop wood. "You'll always be my big, strong, daddy." Once more, what had once seemed quite sweet, now sounded a bit weird.

Dad was weirded out. Not knowing what to do, he held out his hand, offering Sunni a handshake. "Right you are," he said.

Sunni, bewildered, took his hand and shook.

"That beard looks quite the sight on you," Dad said, trying to think of something fatherly to say. "You make quite the pirate."

"Thanks, Daddy," Sunni said, reaching up to touch his stubbly chin. Which is when some cruel and masculine urge to put him in his place suddenly surged within her and she said. "Keep growing yours. Maybe you'll have a beard like mine one day, sport."

She left.

"I feel a bit diminished," Dad said.

Mom got up and gave him a kiss. "You look very handsome."

"Oh, do I? Maybe we have time for — you know?"

"I need to make dinner," Mom said. "Enjoy your pipe."

Mom left Dad to his thoughts. As men go, he was a little in touch with his feelings, as opposed to not at all. So, he discerned that he was feeling threatened by his daughter's surging masculinity. He just had no idea what to do about it. Maybe we should arm wrestle, he thought, as he stepped through the French doors to the porch. He lit his pipe. "Or I could challenge her to a drinking contest."

Back at his place, Carl sat down on a stool, his hands in his lap. "Now, sit still. I'll do this while explaining it to you."

"Okay," Carl said, immediately fidgeting.

“Sit still!” Mom said. She was gathering handfuls of his hair, dividing it.

‘Sorry,” Carl said. It seemed everyone was telling him to sit still anymore.

“Your hair is gorgeous,” Mom said, unable to help herself. “So silky! This is Barbie hair!”

“Barbie?” Carl said, keeping his head still.

From downstairs, he could hear the sounds of his brother and dad watching the football game. American football, that is. “Come on! Come on!” Dad yelled, and then both he and Dan cheered.

“I really wanted to watch that game,” Carl said.

“Well, that’s too bad. You got yourself into this mess.”

“I know,” Carl said. “Thanks again for helping me.”

“I never thought I’d be giving my oldest boy halo braids,” Mom said. “Your hair is so pretty! Oh! I would kill for hair like this. Anyway, it just shows Sunni is a mean person. I mean, halo braids?”

“What’s so bad about halo braids?” Carl asked. He had no idea what they were.

“You’ll see,” Mom said. “Just you wait and see. Oh! This hair, though!”

Once mom stopped rhapsodizing about Carl’s lovely hair, she set into a rhythm. She and Carl chatted, talking about this and that, Mom filling Carl in on all the happenings with his aunts and uncles and cousins and more cousins. Sitting there as his mother brushed and ran her hands through his hair, weaving it, Carl felt a kind of pleasant calm come over him, almost like he was meditating. He listened and made little agreeing noises, asked questions, his bright, feminine voice sparkling with energy. He had eased into it so gently,



he didn't even worry the least that what he was experiencing was not manly, that bonding with mom while she braided his hair was pretty much one of the most girly things he could possibly do.

"Ready?" Mom said, when she finished.

"Yes," Carl said. He was actually quite excited.

"You're not going to like it," Mom said, handing him a mirror.

"Look."

"Omigod," Carl said when he looked at himself. "Oh. Mi. God." He now had thick braids that circled his head like a crown. He had seen the hairstyle before, he now realized. On the bridesmaids at his cousin's wedding. It was utterly feminine.

Which for a guy was not good. Carl gently touched the braids, turning his head this way and that.

"Well?" Mom said.

Carl met her eyes in the mirror. "First, let me say you did a great job. The braids are soooo pretty!"

"And?" Mom said.

"Sunni is evil. I am going to kill her for this!"

Mom made some suggestions to keep them pretty while he slept. They hugged and Carl fled the room, worried the feminine energy was going to make him start crying. He went into his room, reversed the camera on his iPad and looked at himself. "OMG," he whispered. "I am so screwed." There were guys these days with braids. Ponytails. Buns. But he had never seen a guy with halo braids. Never. Probably because it looked like something for a princess. He decided to send a pic to Sunni and get it over with. He took three from different angles until he got one he liked. "Well?"

He texted, adding a bunch of smiley faces sticking out their tongues.  
SEND.

Moments later the iPad chimed. Carl grabbed it and looked. Sunni had texted back LUV along with an emoji of a smiley face with hearts for eyes. For some reason, it just struck him as the funniest thing EVER. Carl hugged the iPad to his chest and giggled. Hearing himself giggle made him giggle more. And more. Finally, he rolled onto his tummy and buried his face in his pillow, giggling and giggling, kicking his feet in the air, punching his pillow, giggling until he wept.

Finally, the giggles subsided. Carl wiped the tears from his cheeks. Caught his breath. “Okay,” he said. “That wasn’t weird.” And then he went to work on his book report. The whole time he worked, he found himself reaching up and touching his braids. They were tight and soft, and they felt good against his fingertips.



## CHAPTER 5.

As Carl drove to school the next morning, he kept glancing in the rearview mirror at his hair. The braids really were just so pretty. He couldn't stop looking at them! As he drove, he assessed his new hairstyle. Negative—bridesmaid hair. Very girly. Positive—his hair was no longer in the way, but instead coiled neatly around his head. Negative—his head seemed to weigh, like, five pounds more than before. Positive—he sort of looked more like a boy. Like many young men, Carl had many features that shaded toward feminine. He had full lips, big eyes, and a cute, pert nose framed by high, sharp cheekbones. He was what some would call a “pretty boy.” That face, framed by long, lustrous hair, had looked decidedly more feminine. Surprisingly, with his hair now up in braids, he looked more himself. Just himself with a silly hairstyle no boy would ever wear to school.

As Carl parked his car, Sunni came out to greet him. “Dude,” she said. “You look like a princess.”

Carl rolled his eyes, even as he touched his hair self-consciously. “I lost the bet,” he said. “This bitch doesn't welch.”

“Did you just call yourself a bitch?” Sunni said.

“It's— I can't help it,” Carl said. “I hope you know it took *for-ever* for my mom to do my hair.”

“You sound like such a girl,” Sunni chuckled. “And, I know,” she said. “Do you think I picked that hairstyle by accident? I was hoping it would mess up your studying for the French test.”

Carl's mouth dropped open. “You little sneak!”

“Hey, just trying to win, babe.”

“Well, I’ll have you know I still got all my studying done. So there!”

“I took a shot. Later, hater!”

Sunni walked away. Carl fumed. Of course, their competition was not over, despite the changes. He decided he would have to look for chances to turn it to his advantage next! We’ll just see how we can turn the tables on Mr. Sneaky Sneak!” He said, giggling evilly. “I mean Miss,” he corrected himself.

As Carl walked into school and down the crowded hallway to his locker, he received a lot of stares and comments. The girls seemed to really like his new style. ‘Oh, my God! I am so jealous! You look adorable!” Carl had never really wanted to make girls jealous with his pretty braids, so the comments hurt, as much as they were intended as praise. Once more, he found girls compulsively drawn to touch his hair. He resolved to stop fighting it, tolerating their gentle caresses with a pained smile.

The boys were boys. I will not share their rude comments here, as I find them most uncouth. Suffice to say, they razzed Carl mercilessly, a state of being he suffered greatly not only because he was not used to being the subject of ridicule, but because he could not answer back without revealing his flute like voice. He was determined to hide his shame as much as possible.

He crushed his French exam, finishing precisely 12 seconds before Sunni, who growled at him. He stuck his tongue out and went back to his seat, triumphant.

“Wiccans did not do this,” Dr. Reilly said.

“You’re sure?” Sunni said.

"I am," Reilly said, looking over the tops of her frames. "First, what you describe would take incredible magic energy. Incredible. I've never seen anything like it in my lifetime. Nothing even close. Second, and this really is most crucial, wiccans do not use our magic to inflict harm on others. We are not story book witches!"

"Could someone have turned to dark magic?" Carl asked.

"I would see it in their aura," Reilly said. "I'm sorry, but I do not think the solution lies in any Wiccan I know of."

They got up to leave. Sunni opened the door for Carl, making a small bow. "Mademoiselle," she said.

"La jerk," Carl said, sassily, of course.

"We effectively eliminated the Wiccans," Sunni said, tugging on her beard. "That only leaves 90% of the school."

"Thank God," Carl said. "That makes it so much easier now. Um, well, anyway, I think we should probably go talk to the most likely suspect of them all!"

"Number three?" Sunni said.

"Number three."

While Carl and Sunni had spent the whole of their academic careers vying for number one, and certain that they would at worst land at #2, right behind them had been the girl they referred to as number three: Corporal Genet. The daughter of a four-star general, Genet had been raised from birth for a glorious military career, a destiny she embraced with zealous determination. Head of the ROTC, she was tough, smart and determined.

"That is one damn fine beard," Genet said, looking at Sunni. "Damn, girl. I am impressed."

Genet was dressed in her perfectly pressed uniform. Every single detail of her person was sharp and neat and precise, as was her ROTC office, as was her walk as was her talk. Even the halo of kinky black hair that surround her ebony face was remarkably precise.

"Right on," Sunni said, first bumping Genet, who did a double take.

"They changed your voices, too?" Genet said. "I heard about the hair."

"They *totally* changed our voices," Carl said.

"Good lord," Genet said. "That is no voice for a man, young or otherwise."

Carl's hand crept to his throat.

"Like the braids, though," Genet said, touching them. "That's some first-rate weaving right there."

"The reason we are here," Sunni said, but Genet interrupted.

"Sit. Sit. You want a Monster? Water?"

Sunni and Carl sat. "No. We don't want to take up much of your time."

"I'm gonna get a Monster," Genet said. "Addicted to these things. Canned energy. B vitamins. We'd had this back in Vietnam, we would have won the war!" She opened her mini fridge to reveal a solid wall of energy drinks. "You sure you don't want one?"

"I'll have one," Carl said.

"Let's see." She grabbed a white can for herself, and a pink one, which she tossed to Carl, who caught it like the boy he still mostly was.

"You're here because as the number three student in our class, I am a likely suspect in your situation," Genet said, cracking open her

Monster and taking a swig. “Ahhhhhh,” she said. “Goes right to the blood stream and BAM!”

“You do seem a likely culprit,” Sunni said.

“It isn’t me,” Genet said. “Tactically, it makes no sense. If I were going to knock you out of the competition, I would do something to either make you sick and miss a bunch of school or slow your cognition. Those would likely draw suspicion, however, so I wouldn’t even do that. Maybe cause you to become super horny so you just want to have sex all the time. That would just make you teen-agers. How does giving you a beard stop you? It doesn’t. So, I wouldn’t do it. Didn’t do it. Believe me or don’t believe me, not my problem.”

“That was actually pretty convincing,” Sunni said, glancing at Carl.

“I’m, like, totally sold,” he said, shrugging.

“Good, because now I am going to turn this around and blow your minds.”

“What do you mean?” Sunni said.

“I want to help you. It offends me as a soldier to see this kind of yellow-bellied snake in the grass no good backstabbing behavior. It has no place at Carrolwood, and I want to see the person caught. Punished. Drawn and quartered! Give me the deets. Maybe I can help.”

They described the sudden nature of the changes. The persistence. How Sunni could not shave her beard, for example. How Carl’s throat had been altered to give him a female’s voice.

Corporal Genet listened intently, her finger steeped under her chin. Once they had finished, she remained deep in thought. “I assume you eliminated magic?”



“First thing,” Sunni said.

“Then I can think of only one thing that could bring about these kinds of changes to your reality,” Corporal Genet said. Of course, she could also just have said what that one thing was, but she liked a little drama. So, she paused and waited as the tension built, the old-fashioned clock on the wall behind her ticking... ticking... the second hand moving around the dial.

“Omjgod!” Carl finally said. “Tell us!”

“A multi-verse Dice-aumatic.”

“Um, like, what?” Carl said.

“My God, man, you talk just like a girl!” Genet said, bursting to her feet.

“You are familiar with the multi-verse theory?”

“Of course,” Carl and Sunni answered in unison, annoyed she would even ask.

Nevertheless, Genet explained, which is fortunate dear reader, in case one of you good souls might just be a little fuzzy. “An infinite number of realities lie parallel to our own. Any version of reality we might imagine, exists. Right now, right along ours. There is a reality, for example, where Carl is a cute girl. A reality where Sunni has a massive beard. And, so on.”

“They covered this in the Avengers,” Sunni said.

“Correct!” Genet shouted. “Yes! But, they did not anticipate the notion of a dice-aumatic.”

“Oh, wow, like, yeah,” Carl said, catching on. “A device that could take a piece of another reality and splice it into ours.”

“I see. I see,” Sunni said. “So, like a film editor, they could take a reality where Carl has long hair...”

“And splice it into this one!” Genet said.

“That explains why I can’t get rid of this beard,” Sunni said.

“In the reality the splice was taken from, you have a big beard. The splice doesn’t change.”

“So, the beard doesn’t change.”

“Bingo!” Genet said

“I still don’t understand why?” Carl said.

“Find your why, find your tormentor,” Genet said. “You should probably get them profiled.”

Carl and Sunni looked at each other. “Millmore,” they said at once.

“He’s weird, but he’s good,” Genet said.

“Thanks so much,” Carl said. “You’ve been such a help!”

“Yeah, mad skills,” Sunni said, fist bumping Genet.

Carl could help but notice no one offered him a fist bump.

As they left Genet’s office, Carl and Sunni felt a renewed sense of hope. The multiverse splicer theory held promise, and the idea of seeking a profile from Millmore was a positive plan of action toward finding their enemy. Angus Millmore held the unique distinction of being the weirdest kid at Carrolwood. The weirdest. It was not just his coke bottle glasses, nor the grating sound of his weed blower voice. He also possessed the most baffling collection of tics and socially awkward habits of any student. Just to illustrate, Kennedy once saw him standing in a corner on one leg, tugging at his hair. Some of the other kids were laughing at him, and so feeling a bit of pity, she said, “Hi!”

Angus looked at her and barked, "Green!" Then hopped away on one foot.

A second illustration: Ahmed had been paired with him for a class project. Much to his surprise, Millmore had proven an excellent partner, eagerly accepting and completing his share of the work. All had seemed well, and in fact, Ahmed had completely revised his opinion of the eccentric fellow. Until the day of the presentation. Angus had shown up with a gold star pasted to his forehead. Each time his turn came to deliver part of the oral portion, he shouted, "I'm Alpha Centauri!" The class laughed. Ahmed seethed. They got a C on their project.

These are but two examples of our young friend's "moments" which, of course, had become legend. And yet, like all Carrolwood students, Angus possessed brilliance, and his brilliance lay in the field of criminal psychology. Indeed, as a ten-year-old, he had correctly unmasked the notorious "Stink Bug Killer" who had eluded police for nearly a decade. That had been the beginning of what was already a legendary career as a profiler, consulted regularly by the FBI to help them crack impossible cases.

So, the thought of putting such a brilliant mind of their case gave them each hope for a quick resolution. On the other hand, they also suffered a great anxiety over what change would happen to them today. "Whatever it is, I don't want boobs," Carl had said.

"You'd look hot as hell with a big old pair of boobies," Sunni had said.

"Har, har," Carl said, crossing his arms over his chest nervously at even the thought. "I hope you lose yours. Everyone will call you flatty"

“That would suck,” Sunni said, disgusted at the thought of having a flat, dumb chest. It would be like she’d turned back into a little girl again!

But their tormentor proved more clever than they had imagined. Because nothing changed that day, which proved almost as terrible. They waited. And waited. When they got home from school, they inspected their bodies. Looked over themselves, sure something had changed. But no. Carl called Sunni. “I kinda think I’m the same,” he said.

“Me, too,” Sunni said. “Odd.”

“Maybe it’s over?”

“I wouldn’t count on it, doll. We’ll see Millmore tomorrow and find out what we can.”

“Kay,” Carl said. “Nighty night!”

“Girl,” Sunni said, hanging up.”

It had taken so long to get his hair done and the braids looked so pretty, that Carl decided to keep them. It was easier, anyway, and they still looked good. He did, however, spend an hour watching hair tutorial videos. There were so many styles! He didn’t know if he could ever learn them all.

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That night, Carl dreamt he was hanging at Ahmed’s house. They were hanging out at the pool, doing cannonballs, trying to make the biggest splash, jumping in, laughing, swimming over to the ladder on the deep end, climbing out to run around the edge of the pool, jump in again.

Carl leapt, high in the air, curled up and crashed into the water, the muffled sound of the splash filling his ears. He emerged, swam over to the ladder, grabbing the rails, pulling himself up, feeling the water sluicing down his body...

Ahmed, Lee and Jack stared, mouths hanging open. "What?" Carl said, confused. He reached up and ran his hands through his hair, arching his back. He heard one of the guys moan, "Christ."

His hands on top of his head, he said, "you okay?" He shrugged, and he felt his chest... bounce. He looked down and saw two firm, round naked breasts swaying on his chest, nipples hard, droplets of water clinging to the perfect skin. Carl screamed and threw his arms over his breasts.... Feeling their full soft weight fill his arms...

He sat up in bed with a shout of fright. Threw down the covers and looked at his... flat chest. "Omigod," he said. "Omigod." He climbed out of bed and examined himself. His body was still the same as it had been that morning. It was all a dream. Or, nightmare.

Carl found himself consumed with fear that he was going to pop out his own pair of boobies. Where he had once taken a great deal of pleasure in checking out the maidenly swelling of the girl's blouses, now each time he glanced at a girl he felt — scared. What would it be like to have breasts like Callie's? Or Jenna's? He found himself holding his books in his arms, covering his chest, he felt strange tingling and he even felt, for a moment, like he did have breasts, soft, round breasts stringing against the front of his shirt.. but when he looked down, nothing.

He felt certain it was an omen. The next change would be boobs. His shirt would pop open and big, creamy, soft breasts would spill forth, while all the guys stared and laughed. It came time for English class. Carl's oral report on The Hunger Games was due. He wrote a note to the teacher, explaining his lost voice. She nodded. "You poor thing. How about if I get a volunteer to read your report for you?"

Carl nodded.

"I love your hair," the teacher said, touching his braids. Carl smiled.

He'd been hoping for a delay, but he didn't know if he would ever get his voice back, so this seemed like a good option. Then, when Kennedy raised her hand to volunteer, his heart sank. Kennedy was not a skilled public speaker. She took his report from him, walked to the front of the room and placed it on the podium. Then, doing a lip trill and coughing into her fist, she began:

"The Hunger Games: A study in the evolving portrayal of women. Hmmn. Kind of a weird topic for a boy. Well, so, anyway...." She started to skim over the report. "I'm just going to summarize. Pretty much, this looks at Katniss, who is a badass. She's cool, which Carl points out..."

She's butchering it! Carl felt his anger building. Kennedy was making him sound like a complete idiot! His report was a masterpiece, and she was making it sound like something an 8th grader would write—and not a super smart eighth grader either. He couldn't take it. "That is not what I wrote!" He squealed, leaping to his feet. The class laughed at the angry sprite tones coming out of

him, but Carl didn't care. His academic reputation was too important. "Thank you, Kennedy, but I got this?" Carl said.

"How come you sound like my little sister?" Kennedy said.

"I thought you lost your voice?" Teacher said.

"I did lose MY voice," Carl said. "For some reason, I sound like this now. Like, deal with it?"

The class laughed. The teacher looked utterly perplexed.

"May I begin?" Carl asked.

The class was chuckling and grinning, smirking and laughing. Carl held his head high. "Class, class," the teacher said.

"Inappropriate."

The students immediately settled down. They were, please recall, superlative. They were teenagers, but they were all quite disciplined in certain areas, and one of those was to immediately adopt proper decorum should any adult utter the dread word, "inappropriate."

Carl took a moment. Allowed the silence to linger. He'd spoken now. In his true voice, or what was currently his true voice. It was appalling for a boy, but he felt good to break his silence. "The Hunger Games..." he began, filling his piping voice with as much gravity as he could manage. "A study in the evolving portrayal of women.... Which is a so totally appropriate topic, by the way..."

As soon as class was over, he bolted for the door. Kennedy came up beside him and put a hand on his arm. "Sunni is so-- mean!" She said.

"I know, right?" Carl said, playing along. "She's, like, so totally full of herself!"

“You even talk like a girl,” Kennedy said, puzzled. “How did she do that?”

“I wish I knew?” Carl said, starting to feel uncomfortable. It was... unmanly to be talking to a girl and to sound even more feminine than she did, especially one he'd dated. He saw the bathroom and decided to make a break. “I need to tinkle,” he said, immediately horrified the word ‘tinkle’ had come out of his mouth. He grabbed the bathroom door and started to pull it open, desperate to get away.

He heard a scream and saw a girl at the sink, putting on lip gloss.

“That’s the little girl’s room,” Kennedy said, chuckling.

“Omigod,” Carl said, slamming the door shut. “Omigod!”

His voice now revealed to, as he would put it, EVERYONE in the whole UNIVERSE! Carl decided he might as well go to lunch and sit with his friends. When he walked in the lunchroom and saw his buddies, he immediately remembered his dream, all his friends drooling over his Kate Uptons. His chest tingled, and he felt himself blush, but he resisted the urge to cross his arms over his actually flat chest and sat down.

“Dude, bro, Carl, my man...” his friends said as he sat down. He just nodded.

“We heard about your voice,” Ahmed said. “Bummer.”

Carl nodded. Despite his breakthrough in class, he felt ashamed for his friends to hear him talk like a girl. “Dude, we’re your friends,” Ahmed said. “You don’t need to worry about us making fun of you or anything.”

“Because you WILL totally make fun of me?” Carl said, deciding to just get over it.



The guys burst out laughing, Carl's cheeks getting pinker. "You sound like a cheerleader or something!" Ahmed said.

"Or a six-year-old!" Jack added.

Carl punched them both on the arm. "Do I hit like a little girl?"

"Pretty much," Jack said, rubbing his arm.

"Jerk!"

After some more ribbing, the guys settled down and turned their attention to regular guy talk. "Look at the way that skirt rides on her booty... legs a mile long... look at the tits on Holly... I'd love to motorboat those all night long..."

"Like, me too..." Carl said, wanting to join in even as the comment awakened his growing breast anxiety. What would his friends say if he came to school one day with jugs?

At Carl's comment, the guys kind of stopped and looked at him.

"What?"

"So, you do still like girls?" Ahmed said.

"I'm still me," Carl said. "I'm so all about the ladies."

More laughter. Carl decided he would just have to put up with it for now. It seemed he would not be taken seriously as a guy as long as he was, like, speechifying so girly girl.

Word of Carl's change had spread all around school, so he was not surprised when Mrs. Calloway immediately approached him at the beginning of theater rehearsal. "Such pretty braids!" She gushed, immediately touching them.

"Thanks," Carl said, trying to sound like he meant it. There was no point fighting this, either, he decided.

Mrs. Calloway almost hid her surprise at the sound of Carl's voice, but he saw the shock flicker across her face. "You're a

soprano,” Calloway said.

“Really?” Carl said, though he’d suspected as much. “I’m am sure this will all be fixed before the show?” He added. “I still want to play the Pirate King, like, so much!”

“Well, Carli- “

“It’s still Carl?”

“Carl. I have given this some thought, and I want you to play the Pirate King even if your voice doesn’t change back.”

“Wait, what?”

“It’s almost like non-traditional casting. How awesome would it be for the Pirate King to bring a strong female voice to the show?”

Carl did not at all like the idea that he was now “a strong female voice.” Nor did he relish the idea of getting in front of the whole world and singing, sounding like some cutesy little Kpop idol. But, he was sure that was not going to happen, because this would all be fixed.

“What do you say?” Calloway said, still toying with his hair.

“I say, let’s do it!”

“Yes! You’re so brave.”

The orchestra adjusted the key of Oh, Better Far to Live and Die — The Pirate King’s big number— to match Carl’s new vocal register. They began to play, and he strode out to his place downstage. He had not sung, really sung, since his voice changed, but he just fell back on his training, giving himself lots of air:

I am the Pirate King?

And it is, it is a glorious thing

To be the Pirate King?

Carl was trying to sing the song with masculine bravado, but he wouldn't help but put the little lifts at the end of the lines, turning statements into questions, sounding not like a bold and fearless pirate but a sweet girl trying her hardest to be cute.

When the number ended there was some slight applause, and Mrs. Calloway came up to Carl. "Okay, your voice is super pretty. Just work on being a little more..." she made fists and air-boxed. "Tough. Charlize Theron. Michelle Rodriguez. Think— Badass."

"Or, um, I could play it like a guy?" Carl said.

"Women can be tough, too," Calloway said. "You should wear your hair like that for the show, by the way. It's perfect."

"Thanks," Carl said, hiding his irritation. *Charlize Theron? For reals?*

Kennedy touched him on the arm. "Luv! Your voice is like crystal!"

He felt someone shove him and turned to see Sunni grinning at him through her mass of beard. "Your voice is so pretty!" She mocked. "You sound just like Elsa!"

"Stop!"

"Let it go. Let it go," Sunni kept mocking.

"Quit!" Carl squealed.

"Quit! Stop!" Sunni kept on, laughing.

The other kids watched, curious. Were they flirting?

The rumors started to sizzle around social media before practice even ended.

Millmore had agreed to meet after theater practice. They'd emailed him on his CompuServe Account—it was the best way to reach him they'd been told. He told them to meet him down by Lake Alice, where they found him sitting on the old bike rack. He had a bag of popcorn in his hands, from which he dipped and nibbled. "No need to waste time with ritual greetings," Millmore said, his eyes locked on the lake.

"Okay. Hi, so..." Carl started.

"No need for social niceties," Millmore said. "Your case intrigues me. I read the email. Tell me everything again. Every detail. You never know which detail is the ONE."

"Um, so, like, okay, well, I was just like so looking forward to senior year..." Carl started, his voice extra squeaky with excitement.

"Stop!" Millmore said.

"Whaaaa?" Carl squeaked.

"You tell it," Millmore said, gesturing toward Sunni.

Carl huffed. Sunni related the details of their changes in clear, simple, concise language. Carl tried to jump in a couple times, but she cut him off. He finally just played with a strand of hair that had escaped from his braids, and was dangling at his cheek, while the "boys" talked.

When Sunni finished, Millmore tossed a piece of popcorn in the air and caught it in his mouth. "Okay. Okay."

Having heard of his brilliance, Sunni and Carl both kind of thought he would just shout, eureka or something and tell them who did it. They waited. He shoved more popcorn in his mouth, chewing and mumbling, pieces of the popcorn spitting out his mouth and

tumbling down the front of his tie. “Turns and twists, twists and turns...”

“So, like, do you have any suspects?” Carl asked.

“I have work to do!” Millmore shouted, throwing his popcorn in the air. “The puzzle is a hand!” With that he leapt to his feet and ran off toward the lake, waving his arms and shouting, “Excelsior!”

“Is he, I don’t understand?” Carl said. “What’s happening?”

Sunni nudged him. “He’s on the case. Let’s go.”

“I still haven’t changed again?” Carl said, as they walked back toward campus.

“Me, neither.”

“The suspense is driving me crazy!”

“My mom’s here. Gotta run,” Sunni said.

“Buh-bye!” Carl said, hating that he couldn’t seem to stop himself from being such a— ditz? Well, he could only hope Millmore would crack the case and fast. In the meantime, like, he would just have to deal.

He got in his car and started driving him. “Let it go, let it go,” he found himself singing. “I don’t know the words to this song!” Shoot. He did sound like Elsa, he realized. Or, maybe, Elsa’s little sister.



## CHAPTER 6.

The week passed, dear reader. There were no more changes. Let us, for now, turn our attention to what was going on with Sunni, pretty, pretty Sunni, who was now, with her mighty beard, looking a bit rugged and handsome. Though she had seemed to take her changes more in stride than Carl, that was actually not the case. Sunni liked being a girl. She enjoyed being a female. She had, it must be said, sometimes wondered what it would like to be a guy. To be big and strong and sweaty. But she had never wished to have a beard. Not once. The mere presence of the beard and her deep voice had altered her relationships with so many people.

Sunni continued to find things between her and her dad— weird. He suddenly felt the need to establish his manhood, as if the two of them were in competition. He'd dusted off his much disused weight set in the garage and had been lifting, a fact he'd made sure to mention to her. Repeatedly. He would bring it up at random times and for seemingly no reason. Sunni would come home and say, "Hey, Dad" and instead of saying something like, "how was school?" He would say, "I just got done doing curls. My biceps are swole."

She got it, but she didn't get it. Despite her mountain man beard and Dothraki warlord voice, she was still his little girl. She missed being treated like his little girl. Being— a daughter. She was still Sunni, and it had all been odd because everyone seemed to talk to her like she was a boy now. Or, rather, *listen* to her like she was a boy. Or, a man. It was a revelation to her how much people just

seemed to LISTEN. Really, LISTEN. The deep voice and the beard were power!

But, it also meant the other girls talked less around her. It felt like she made them nervous. Like they didn't feel comfortable opening up, talking freely. Like they thought of her not as just a guy, but like a grown-up. Sunni needed her friends, her squad, and she felt more alone, more isolated since her changes.

The one person who seemed un-phased was her mother. Mom was still Mom, ever supportive and loving and sunny and huggy and sweet. She embraced the beard and the voice. "Oh, you sound so commanding!" She'd say. Or, "your beard is so bearded. You are quite the presence!" Sunni couldn't tell her mother how much it meant to her. I mean that, reader. Literally. Much as Carl had found himself chirping in the sing song cadences of a teen girl, Sunni had found herself speaking in the flat, more monotonous manner of a male. Often, she just grunted. Her Mom did not seem to mind or notice, but it bothered Sunni when she wanted to say, "Mom! You're the best!" And instead she said, "Okay" in a flat, dead voice. When her friends were gushing on about something, as in "The new season of Riverdale is everything!" Sunni would respond with something like, "It's a'ight."

Her feelings were bottled up. She simply could not express them.

The two of them agonized all week, wondering what would change and when. The tension built day by day. On Friday, they were so stressed they imagined changes happening hour by hour. Carl's leg fell asleep, and the tingling made him scream like a horror



movie drama queen. Sunni's backpack got caught on a door, and she howled in rage, her voice booming down the hall like thunder. They saw Millmore on occasion, walking down the hall with elaborate looking scanning equipment making all manner of beeps and bops. Or, with an old-fashioned magnifying glass, staring intently at a spot on the wall. If they tried to talk to him, though, he would just say something nonsensical and then run from them as fast as he could, waving his arms. He did send them daily emails with the same message: Making progress.

At the end of rehearsal on Friday they stood in front of school and talked while Sunni waited for her Mom. "Maybe we should, um, you know, do our own investigating? Not just wait on Millmore?"

Sunni was in a bad mood, and Carl's effeminate way of ending just about every statement as if it were a question grated on her nerves, though she usually found it kind of sweet. She tried to control herself and just say nothing, but it seemed to just burst out of her. "Statements aren't questions? Like, a-kay?"

"You know I can't help it," Carl said, concentrating hard to keep from letting his voice rise on the last word.

'You just did,' Sunni said. "You just did help it."

"You're so grumpy," Carl said, focusing again. "God!"

"I always found you annoying," Sunni said. "But now it's unbearable. Could you SHUT UP?"

Carl took a step back. Raised his hands. "I am not even!" He said. "Buh-byeeee!" He turned and walked away.

Sunni shook her head, then heard a little honk as her mother pulled up. She had been wondering about investigating— herself. But she sick of Carl.

This early in the semester, most of the social activities were low key. Getting together with some friends for pizza and movies. That sort of thing. Carl's friends were playing Dungeons and Dragons, and they begged him to come, but he just wasn't feeling it. Besides, he had a lot of studying to do. And he needed to do something about his hair. In fact, he was having a hair emergency.

His halo braids had started to pull out. There were fly away hairs, and the braids themselves had lost the tightness that had made them so pretty. Carl, after watching hours of videos about how to do different hairstyles, had come to realize that he'd not only been given long hair, but had been infused with a feminine obsession with his hair that actually seemed to exceed anything he'd ever seen from Sunni (let us remember that Sunni hid her extraordinary skin and hair routine, preferring everyone to think she was just "born with it."). And so, Carl was pleased and a bit excited to really have a chance to sit down and do *something* with his hair.

Carl had approached his new experience the same way he approached everything: research. And so once he left little Miss Grumpy Pants and went to his car, he headed to a drugstore and pulled out his list, filling his basket with the supplies he would need: shampoo and conditioner, oils and hair ties and bobby pins and turtle clips and brushes and combs, a salon quality hair dryer and on and on. The change had not— yet— given Carl a delight in shopping, nor had it provided him immunity from being a bit embarrassed as he shopped for items he considered to reside firmly in the realm of the female. Yet, his compulsion to fix his hair over-rode his boyish embarrassment, forcing him to purchase what he needed. He did,

however, twice flee the hair accessories aisle when girls from school came in the store, going on to the magazine rack and pretending they read Sports Illustrated, his basket of feminine plunder hidden behind his legs.

He hoped they didn't notice how sloppy his braids had gotten. Girls could be so judge.

At home, sighing with relief as he closed the door to his room, he set about his new ritual. First, Carl washed his long hair and then treated with conditioner— twice. After, he used a rake comb to gently work out any knots. He had read that rough combing and brushing could cause split ends, so his motions were delicate and fine as he worked his wet hair. He then turned his hair dryer on low— hot air was also so bad for hair!- and gently brushed his hair as he dried it, patiently working and waiting, willing to put in the extra time to make sure he kept his hair pretty, pretty.

Once his long hair was dry— it was so bouncy and shiny!- he turned to the numerous hair style ideas he pinned to his board on Pinterest. Indeed, Carl had been amazed to discover just how many different kinds of hairstyles there were to choose from— even just counting the ones currently in style— and he'd briefly been paralyzed facing the array of choices girls faced. He made a note to himself to research how much time and energy women had to expend on things like hair, and whether it impacted their ability to compete with men. After spending some hours looking through his options, Carl had managed to narrow his list down to the following: a low, wavy ponytail with a sleek top, a messy and slouch low braid with a sleek top,, a simple side braid with a messy top, a half-updo with a twisted bun, a low chignon, a half up-do with a bubble braid,

an exquisite high bun up do, or space buns. He'd briefly considered a Princess Leia, but it just didn't seem right as he was really more of a Rey man.

Carl dithered. He started this one, started that one. He just couldn't decide! Is, this, like, a change that was made in me? He wondered. Or, is it, um, just the result of choice overload? Carl had never struggled to make decisions before, and it frustrated him so! Having already experienced the halo braid— and it was quite a hit, he had to admit— he decided to try something new, and finally after much sighing and many frustrated little 'unh!' sounds, he settled on the hairstyle he'd found called the "exquisite bun up-do." It would keep the hair out of his way, he told himself, and it would also prove an interesting challenge. The description under the picture— and the girl was smoking hot, he would love to do her— said it was easy. Yet, looking at the hair, and even with his advanced intellect, Carl had no idea how anyone could get her hair to look like *that*. Things certainly are more complex for the ladies! So, he watched the how-to video and went to work, a bobby pin clenched in his teeth as he gathered his hair and went to work.

An hour later, a triumphant Carl held his phone up and snapped a selfie. His hair looked magnifique! He was so proud of himself he ended up taking three pictures— which he would share with no one, of course, and then he went to his bedroom mirror and admired it some more. You go girl, he thought, teasing the stands that framed his face. It was kind of fun, he decided, to play with his hair. Maybe even after he was back to normal, he'd grow his out. Short hair was so— lame?

Finally, Carl tore himself away from the fascinating image of his fabulous hair. He did have studying to do. Whatever else happened, he was determined to be valedictorian. He climbed onto his bed with his smart-pad and started reading *Les Miserable*— in French. But despite his best efforts, at least ten percent of his brain was gleefully considering how he should do his hair for graduation.

The weekend passed without changes or progress from Millmore. Carl studied and played with different hairstyles, much to the chagrin of his mother, who found herself annoyed that her son was spending his time practicing buns and braids and updos.

Sunni's dad invited her to come lift with him. Sunni said, "Yeah." It would be a chance to spend time with her dad and bolster his fragile male ego. Athletic, yes, but genetics being what they were, she lagged far behind her dad in upper body. He clearly felt much better about himself as he proved he could outfit his little girl. It made Sunni happy— and sad— but mostly happy, as she didn't like making her father feel like less of a man. It was good for him, she decided, to show his strength, even if he did have pitiful facial growth and a kind of high-pitched voice.



## CHAPTER 7.

Just when the anxiety over their impending changes had faded and both Carl and Sunni had come to feel that maybe they were done being transformed, they transformed.

The changes happened Monday. For Carl, it was during gym class. Carl had gone back to the exquisite bun updo for Monday, much to the gushing delight of the girls and the usual ridicule from the boys. He'd even begun to forget about his voice in the sense that it no longer sounded odd to him to hear the chirping sounds of a nightingale flowing mellifluously from his lips. And so it was that as he and the other kids in gym class played volleyball inside the gym—it was, sad to say—raining outside- he was calling, “I got it! I got it!” When he changed. Carl was so intent on what he was doing, carefully popping the ball up, setting it perfectly Mandy Wilcox could leap in the air and spike it mercilessly into the faces of the other team he didn't even notice his new feature. “Yeah!” Carl squealed, high fiving his triumphant team mate.

Which is when his arch-nemesis, Matt Manning, you will remember him as the one who embarrassed Carl at soccer practice, sneered, “Nice shorts.”

“What?” Carl said, but even as he did he became aware that his shorts felt very tight and exceedingly small. In fact, they felt like they ended at the very tops of his thighs. They felt the way a girl's short shorts looked. Carl looked down. He was, indeed, wearing a pair of peach colored nylon short shorts. And it was hard to tell looking down but—

“Your legs!” Mandy said.

“What?” Carl said, touching his legs, realizing they were smooth and hairless.

“They are really sexy,” Mandy said.

“For a girl,” Matt added. Matt’s attention, however, had been drawn to Carl’s rear end, which was now as perfectly formed as that of any girl on campus. Indeed, his hips had rounded as well, and from the waist down Carl now had the body of a teen model. Carl’s tooshie was now so glorious an example of female perfection, that even though Matt knew it belonged to a boy, he could not help but shake his head in admiration. He would even have complimented Carl on his truly fine posterior, but he knew to comment on a young woman’s booty, even when it belonged to a young man, was taboo at Carrollwood Day School— at least when there were teachers around.

“Oh, no,” Carl said, once more feeling the full-body shame he’d felt when his voice changed. They were all looking at him— boys and girls and teachers— looking at him standing there in short shorts just like those worn by many of the girls, and given that he had not yet really seen his shapely legs nor his truly impressive booty, he was more humiliated and ashamed to find he was cross-dressing in front of everyone. “Mr. Gravely?” He said. “Can I, um...?”

“Yeah. Yeah, yeah...” Gravely said, disturbed by the feelings he was feeling toward the legs he was trying not to stare at. “It’s fine.”

Carl hurried off to the locker room, his coltish legs flashing, his newly delightful backside wiggling. The girls couldn’t help but notice his gait had become graceful and sweetly feminine. The boys couldn’t help notice— and the feeling disturbed them and confused them— that Carl’s butt was the bomb



‘Poor guy,” Mandy said. And everyone nodded in agreement. What would it be like for a boy to be so— sexy? None of them could even imagine.

There was a full length mirror in the locker room, and Carl stood in front of it, his hands over his mouth to hold back a scream, as he looked at his gorgeous legs in the mirror, at his rounded hips, at his short shorts. He shook his head, refusing to believe it. His legs looked longer, and they had the pleasing round shape he had so often admired on young ladies. His ankles were small and pretty. He turned to the side and saw how his now plump rear end had the lifted, rounded shape sure to drive any boy wild. His fear of having breasts forgotten, he now wanted to curl up into a ball and die. “I look.. my legs...? I’m.... No... no... no...”. His soft voice echoed around the locker room mocking him, a pretty voice that now matched his pretty legs. As he looked in horror at his sexy legs, he idly fixed his hair, not even realizing he was doing it.

It must be said at this point, that everything masculine in Carl wilted just a little to see his body now taking on the shape of a very desirable female. He had looked many times at legs like these and felt himself grow hot with lust. He had enjoyed the sight of rears shaped like his new one, and he had experienced impure thoughts. He’d been a popular boy, strong and well-formed, and it felt like a punch in the gut to know that so much had been taken from him, replaced with soft, round and sexy. He considered running away. Getting into his car, driving home, crawling under the covers and never coming out. But, he had never skipped out on school in his life, and despite what was obviously an emergency, he did not want to risk a blemish on his record.

More, there was a test in Economics. A big test.

Carl had no choice. He would just have to lower his head and charge through this day, endure it and move on. There was no other option. He took some comfort in the thought that he would at least be wearing trousers, so no one would see—

Carl pulled open the door to his locker and shook his head, once more sighing, “no... no... no.” He thought things could not get worse, but they had. Hanging in his locker was a pleated, tartan skirt. A crisp white blouse. Looking down, he saw a pair of girl’s shoes with little buckles. Really?” He shrieked. “Really?”

He stared at the girl’s uniform in horror. It was— a girl’s uniform. He could not possibly wear it. No. That was out of the question. He would call Mom. Get her to bring him clothes. He glanced at the clock, did calculations. “There’s not enough time,” he whispered. “I need more time.”

He didn’t have more time. In five minutes, the rest of the kids would come back to the locker room to change. Carl could not bear the thought of being here when all the other boys came back, sweaty and shouty. As horrified as he was at the thought of wearing a skirt, he certainly couldn’t be seen running around school in these shorts. He’d seen how he looked, and no. No!

He couldn’t bear the thought of anymore kids seeing him— practically naked. “I’m going to kill you!” He shouted, pushing his shorts down his long legs. He was so distracted he did not even notice he was wearing girl’s underwear. He grabbed his skirt and stepped into it, hoping whoever was doing this to him could hear him screaming. “I am going to destroy you for this!” Grabbing his blouse, Carl pulled it on, tucking it into his skirt. It was much like a

boy's shirt, except the buttons were on the wrong side and it featured a rounded, feminine collar. He put on his dickie, and making a puking sound, picked up the shiny patent leather Mary Janes, with the sparkling buckle. Sitting, his skirt rode up, and he squirmed uncomfortably as he felt the cold bench against his bare thighs. There had been a pair of knee high socks in his locker, but in one last defiant attempt to cling to at least an ounce of masculine dignity, he refused to wear them, instead slipping the tiny shoes onto his now tiny feet, buckling them. Standing up, he felt the skirt flow around his legs. Ignoring the sensation, he grabbed "his" backpack, screaming one last time as he slung the pink and white My Little Kitty backpack over his shoulder.

"I'm 17!" He screamed once more at his unseen tormenter. "Like, I would still be into kittens. Idiot!" The door to the locker room slammed opened as the boys came barreling in from the gym. Carl ran for the other exit, the one that led to the school, his heart racing. He did NOT want Matt Manning to see him like this!

Matt saw what looked from the back like a tall girl running from the room, her skirt swaying in a most fetching manner. "Was that Carl in a skirt?" He asked one of the other guys.

"That dude is messed up," the guy said.

Matt dropped the subject. He was having very strange feelings toward Carl Bright and his stunning legs. He wasn't sure what to make of them.

Walking, something Carl had taken for granted and done with ease since he'd first learned to move about on two feet rather than all fours, no longer felt right. Carl could certainly walk, but what had felt easy and natural, now felt awkward and unbalanced. It was not

his shoes. It can be said with no doubt they looked quite adorable on his precious little feet, the buckles sparkling with each hurried stride. It was more that his legs now felt as if they were too long and set too far apart. Indeed, though Carl remained his former 6' 1" in height, his legs had grown in proportion to his torso, which had shrunk, giving him the stork-like appearance common to lithe young ladies. His hips, while slender by female standards, were wider and rounder than they had been, and of course, he now had a lot more 'junk in the trunk' to use the parlance of your times. These changes combined to force Carl to put a little wiggle in his walk, which was quite unnerving and felt decidedly unmasculine. Indeed, as I related earlier, Carl's walk was decidedly feminine, as if he had spent hours working on perfecting a lady-like gait, so his sense that he was "walking like a girl" was not wrong, though he actually had no idea how feminine his walk had become. Let us come right out and say it: Carl now moved more gracefully than most every girl at the school, appearing almost as if he were floating and not walking at all. Yet, to him, it all felt awkward and wrong.

He kept his eyes on the ground as he hurried to class. For the first time since his last growth spurt, he regretted being tall. It was impossible to hide when you towered over just about everyone. More, his lowered face was not hidden from those who must gaze up at him, and so girls and boys alike let their eyes ride up those magnificent gams to find the face of Carl Bright, basketball and baseball star, staring at the ground, his cheeks red with shame as his skirt swirled around his legs.

Oh, yes. I should mention Carl's feeling about his skirt. There has been something of a trend of late— boys wearing shorter shorts,

like those worn by NBA stars back in the 1970s before Chris Webber and the “Fab Five” popularized long, baggy shorts. So, you will see young men now wearing shorts that come to mid-thigh. These are the boys out in front, the ones on the cutting edge of fashion. Carl was no such boy. He had continued to wear baggy shorts that came down to his knees. So, with his new skirt coming only to mid-thigh, Carl felt cool air swirling around his long, smooth legs more fully than he ever had before. It made him feel—vulnerable. Exposed. Further, he could feel his skirt swishing around as he walked, caressing his legs with delicate little movement. The skirt did not provide the same sense of security as shorts. It felt like it might flip up at any moment, giving the whole school a glimpse of—more of Carl. So, in addition to the simple fact that Carl believed skirts were for girls, and wearing one made him less of a boy, wearing one did automatically fill him with a decidedly feminine sense of insecurity and vulnerability that he most certainly did not want to embrace.

Carl burst into his Economics classroom, going straight to his usual desk, draping his My Little Kitty backpack over the chair and sliding into his seat, his skirt once more riding up his legs. With a squeak and a grimace, he rose back up, smoothing his skirt as he sat back down, then he slumped in his seat, exhausted from the stress. Years of habit kicked in, and his mind turned to reviewing the material for the Eco test, which he had memorized and was now reciting in his head. This scene reveals, I must point out, just how strong Carl’s mind truly was, despite the fact he now spoke like a scatterbrained dingbat. How many young men could find themselves dressed as a girl, sporting a pair of sexy female legs,

and just forget all about that as they focused on their schoolwork? Not many, I will suggest. Maybe only one.

“Ahem.”

Carl, who’d been twisting a strand of hair around his fingers as he mentally prepared, looked up to see the teacher standing next to his desk, arms crossed, looking stern. “Um, ya?” Carl said.

“Carli...” teacher started.

“It’s Carl?”

“Well, Carl. Why are you wearing a girl’s uniform?”

“O— mahgod,” Carl said. “This is sooo embarrassing. Well, it all started while we were playing volleyball, and I was, like, I got it I got it!—”

“Okay. Stop. You can’t wear a girl’s uniform. It is against the dress code. You need to go to the office.”

There were titters and snickers from the other students, who’d been drifting into the room.

“But, there’s a test today?”

“Office. Now.”

“Wait! Please? Please please pretty please let me take the test first? Please?”

The teacher frowned. “Only because I know something has been going on with you and Sunni and this—” Dr. Ben waved toward Carl’s clothes— “probably isn’t your fault. Fine. But, Carl, one thing.”

“Oui?”

“Close your legs. Everyone can see your panties.”

Carl squealed and slammed his legs shut while the class laughed. He heard someone say, “He’s wearing panties?”

Carl's cheeks turned an even deeper shade of red, the blush spreading across his nose. He tugged at the hem of his skirt, wishing it were longer, or that he was, like, wearing boy pants! He became conscious of the way his soft thighs felt, pressed together, and he stewed in the horror that not only was he wearing panties, but that people had SEEN them. *I'm going to die*, he thought. *I'm going to have to run away to Paris and live on the street like an urchin from Les Miserable! I'll never live this down! My reputation is ruined!*

In that moment of melodramatic teen-age angst, and let us be honest, Carl's reputation as a boy had suffered an egregious blow which would probably follow him the rest of the year and all the way to the 20 year class reunion, Carl had every intention of fleeing the country. But not until after he aced the Economics test.

Which he did.

Once he'd submitted his test, Carl got his backpack and left class, heading toward the office as he'd been told. However, he diverted to the bathroom and once inside, he got out his phone—which he had to keep in his bag now since his skirt had no pockets—another reason skirts are dumb, he thought—and he called Mom. “Mom?” He said, making his voice extra sweet.

“What is it?” Mom said, clearly annoyed. “I was just about to head out to yoga.”

“I have an emergency. Can you bring me one of my uniforms?”  
*Don't ask why. Don't ask why. Don't ask why.*

“Why?” Carl could hear stairs creaking as his mom headed toward his room.

“Someone stole my clothes.”

“Sunni!” Mom hissed. “That's it! I'm calling her parents.”

“It wasn’t Sunni.”

“Who was it, then?” He heard the sound of a door opening and closing. The sound of hangars being shoved around.

“I’ll explain everything when you get here?”

Mom was silent. Carl waited. He could sense something was wrong. “Mom?”

“Maybe you need to explain right now,” Mom said. “Carl, what is going on?”

“Why? What happened?”

“There’s nothing in your closet but— girl clothes.”

“Waaaaaa?”

Sunni changed about the same time as Carl, as near as I recall, dearest reader. It’s hard since they were in two different places, and I am a limited omniscient narrator. Obviously. Or, I would already know who was behind this whole thing, and I am dying to find out. Perhaps I should pause here, in fact, to share with you some details of Millmore’s investigation?

No. I suspect you are more interested in Sunni. Let me tell you about her, and then I will let you know about Millmore later. Yes. That makes sense.

So, Sunni found herself in her Women’s Studies class, sitting in her usual desk, tugging on her beard as her teacher, Dr. Anne Carpenter, discussed historical evidence that in Viking culture women fought alongside men. “The preponderance of evidence suggests,” she was saying, a slide of an ancient carving portraying a woman warrior with a spear and a shield flickering on the screen behind her, “that the notion that women were not suited to fighting is



a relatively new conception brought about by the also new concept of male rule, or, in other words, patriarchy.”

Just as Dr. Carpenter paused to allow her point to sink in, and as the young women sitting in attendance jotted down their notes, Sunni had the strangest sensation that her desk was shrinking. Indeed, whereas she'd fit comfortably within it over the course of many years, her knees now banged into the desktop. As alarming as such a feeling was, it was immediately supplanted by a sense that the room itself was shrinking, as were her classmates who seemed to somehow be dropping below her eye line until she was looking down on their pretty heads. Panicking, she looked left and right, and whereas she once would have met the other girls' stunned faces on roughly eye-level, she now found them all looking up, their chins raised, as their mouths fell open.

“What's happening?” Sunni's voice boomed. Sunni, being quite intelligent, realized almost immediately that the room and her classmates were not, in fact, shrinking. She had grown. Not a short girl, she'd sprouted from her comfortable 5' 8" a full six inches, so she was now 6' 2" tall and much too large for the formerly perfectly sized desk.

“Your entitled male friend has played another of his sexist pranks,” Dr. Carpenter said in a dour and disapproving voice. “He seems to consider tall a male trait, akin, say, to a beard. He really is in need of sensitivity training.”

Sunni unfolded herself from her desk. Her arms and legs felt gangly and ridiculous to her. She spread her arms wide judging immediately that her wingspan now exceeded six feet. Dr.

Carpenter, a tall woman herself at nearly 6' looked up at Sunni. "Please sit," she said. "I have not concluded my lecture."

It was only when Sunni sat, sweeping her hand under her to smooth her skirt, that she realized she was now wearing pants. She looked down to see the boy's tie draping down her dress shirt, which fit a little too tightly in the chest area now, as it was tailored for a boy. "Sorry," she said, even as she struggled with a welling of conflicting feelings crowding her brain.

"Never apologize," Dr. Carpenter said. "It makes you seem weak."

Nothing felt right. Sunni's hands had changed in proportion to her new size, and her pen felt tiny and hard to grip. It took practice to find the right distance and position to write properly, and her knees! They were pressing against the desktop.

We must examine and discuss Sunni's experience. She lived in an era in which girls routinely dressed in clothes that once coded "male." She had done a little playful crossdressing herself, one year putting on a football uniform for the homecoming parade. There was a difference, though, in choosing to dress "boy" and having someone else force her into a boys' uniform in the middle of a normal school day in which there was no "open space" for experimentation. I have pointed out already that Grand Old Carrollwood was quite bound by tradition and rules. Dressing as a boy without a safe reason—Halloween, for example, or a sanctioned Gender Swap Day, was a violation of these traditions, and Sunni felt herself blushing in shame, even so far as to feel like a gender traitor. She and many other girls had long complained of the outdated requirement that girls wear skirt. Not that they minded the skirt in and of itself. They chose to

wear them on their free time when they wanted to. It was being required to wear a skirt as some sort of outward show of their femininity, which in a patriarchal culture had been inscribed as a show of submission, that they objected. Nevertheless, forced to wear skirts, she and the other girls had chosen to see it as a symbol of their shared repression, a sign that bound them all together in a sisterhood that would change the world! Now, dressed in men's slacks, was she no longer a sister?

She hoped her fellow females would understand this was not her choice.

Her height, too, posed problems.

In past years, indeed, height had been a "male" quality. Even in the late 20th Century, if a girl grew too quickly, her anxious parents would seek medical help, putting her on drugs in order to stop her from getting too tall. It was widely believed, and not without some truth, that a tall girl would have a very difficult time finding a husband. The proper romantic couple was always depicted as an adoring female gazing up at her man. Indeed, would it surprise the reader to know that if a male actor was shorter than his female counter part, the entire film he would be standing on boxes in order not to disturb the viewer with the terrifying image of a man gazing up at a woman?

Sunni, despite her years of study and absolute commitment to female equality, which included dismantling all such notions of gender relations, had yet liked herself at her height. She felt she was, indeed, just the right size for a 21st Century girl. Despite her commitment to equality, however, she had been influenced by the

media, and she had never dated a boy who was not tall enough that it required her to tilt her head back to gaze into his handsome face.

So, her own identity was threatened by her new, unladylike size, and she felt humiliated to be in a room of her peers- now a cross-dressing giant.

This is all to say that Sunni's changes were quite as unnerving to her as those faced by Carl, though some might think there was little but advantage in being tall and wearing the more functional cloths allowed to the young men.

Sunni watched the clock, meaning to call her mother and request a change of clothes, just as Carl had done. But, just as the minute hand was about to click over and the bell ring, the intercom squawked and a voice called, "Sunni Linn, please come to the office."

Sunni's heart sunk. She was in trouble. And Sunni Linn had never been in trouble!

The bell rang. Sunni untangled her long limbs from the desk. She stood and made her way to the door, now towering over all but one of the young women around her. They gave her space, intimidated by her size. Hailey Waters, who stood 6' tall herself, made her way over to Sunni. "Welcome to the tribe."

"Pardon?"

"The tall tribe. We are a special people."

"Thanks. I guess."

"You need to come out for the basketball team," she said.

"Just because I'm tall?" Sunni said.

"Yeah," Hailey said, chucking her on the shoulder. "Pretty much."

Walking down the hall, Sunni was shocked at how different the world looked from above. Instead of being on roughly the same eye-line girls and slightly below most of the boys, she now found herself looking down on almost everyone. It made her feel self-conscious. Once more, the sense that she was not as *close* to her classmates as she was used to and loved, invaded her soul and left her cold. Sunni loved people, and she loved being among people, part of the group. She did not feel that as she waded through the crowded halls of Carrolwood Academy. She felt rather like a giraffe striding aloof, a herd of sheep milling about beneath her. As she ran into friends along the way, she found herself slumping over, trying to look at them face to face. It did not work. The sightlines were still all wrong. Plus, her friends were freaked out by her giant hands.

Incidentally, dear reader, we have just witnessed the impossible. You see, Sunni was known, among other things, for having perfect posture. At all times. Whether she was sitting, standing, walking, running, doing yoga, roller skating, jumping rope— really, any task you can imagine, her spine was perfectly aligned. Until now. Perhaps this astounding sight, the impossible and confounding sight of Sunni slouching, was even more shocking than her growth spurt!

While Sunni found herself quite displeased with what being a giant meant in term of her relationship to other students, she did also realize an advantage: she could now see the whole length of the hall. It made her feel— powerful— to be able to look all the way to the end of the hall, to see everything that was going on up and down the hall.

In any case, as she moved toward the office, Sunni's mind turned to why she'd been called down. How could they have heard she'd

turned into a giant? She didn't know. She would soon find out.



## CHAPTER 8.

Millmore had his back to a wall of lockers and sidled along them, his face largely covered by a large, floppy hat in a banana yellow that did not look good on him at all despite the fact that he was sure the hat made him look devilishly handsome. Millmore had completed his profile. Child's play. He'd narrowed his list of suspects. Now, the tricky part. Narrowing the list to one and bringing that person to justice. To that end, Millmore had snuck down the hall, and now waited outside the computer lab, where one of his suspects had gone to "work" during study hour. The student in question was a bit OCD, and always left the lab at precisely 12:43 to wash their hands. Millmore looked at his fob watch. 12:42. Perfect. He waited. Just as expected, the door to the lab opened. Millmore remained flat against the lockers, and as soon as his suspect's echoing steps disappeared down the hall, he slipped into the computer lab, went right to the computer station where his suspect had been working, and looked at their browser history.

Why? You may ask.

Flashback!

When Millmore had first heard of the case, he'd believed that what was happening was completely novel. In fact, he'd been quite excited to unlock the secrets of a mind that would conceive of this gender swapping crime. Then, his research had led him to a website



called Fictionmadness. Here, Millmore found a repository of what was known as gender swap fiction— thousands upon thousands of stories. Mildly intrigued, he began skimming over a story called Team Spirit, in which a male quarterback was slowly transformed into a busty blonde with a little girl’s voice and then forced to work as a stripper. When Millmore finished the story, he felt hot and thirsty. His head swam. He kept thinking about a scene in the story where the quarterback is forced to start wearing high heels. He refused, at first, but then got bullied into it. Then, later a line, “He wore heels all the time now. He didn’t even notice.”

Millmore shivered with a strange new pleasure at the thought of the formerly macho man, mincing around in his heels, accepting it as part of his new life. It stunned him. He loved it. Having finished reading the story, though he would never stop being haunted by it, Millmore had looked at the clock. Remember, this had happened at night some days ago. It was 10:43. Millmore needed to get to bed. In fact, his parents thought he was in bed and not under his covers with his smart pad glowing.

One more story, he decided. For research. He found one called Lab Rat. In this one, too, a dirt bag guy is turned into a busty blonde. He, too, ends up with a little girl voice. The feminizers use subliminal messages to make him obsess over women’s clothes. They shorten the tendons in his legs, so he has no choice but to wear high heels all the time. He becomes his own fantasy girl. His wife laughs at him.

Once more, Millmore’s mind buzzed with a mysterious new sense of delight. It might have confused him, but he didn’t stop to analyze. He just read another story and another story and another story...

cheating husbands turned into little girls and raised by their aggrieved wives as daughters... bad boys becoming good girls... good boys becoming bad girls.... When his smart pad chimed, telling him it was time to get up and go to school, Millmore was shocked to realize he'd been reading all night.

Research, he told himself as he climbed out of bed. Research. Yet, when he went to the bathroom to brush his teeth, he found himself wondering what he would look like as a blonde.

But what does all that have to do with the case? Very much. All day long at school, Millmore found himself thinking of the stories he'd read. He also found himself really wishing he had Jenny Halston's hair, but that was another issue. His detective instinct was telling him there was something more to his digression into gender bender fiction. Something more to do with the case. He pondered the question even while he watched Sarah Paul putting on lip gloss—and felt a pang of jealousy.

As is often the case, it was when Millmore stopped thinking about the case that the answer came to him. He'd been forced to concentrate his attention on dissecting a frog—a virtual frog, to be sure, but it was still pretty disgusting. As he focused on his task, a thought had popped into his head, and he'd shouted, "Eureka!"

Doctor Emerson, used to Millmore's eccentricities, had simply given him a weary look that said, "again?"

As soon as class was over, Millmore ran to his locker, pulled out his smart pad and did a keyword search on Fictionmadness. The admins really did run a first-rate site, he noted as he skimmed through the results. Then- bingo. The story was called Carrolwood. The synopsis read: They thought they were so great. But Charly and

Suni-chan are about to be taken down a peg! A gender swap revenge fantasy! Or, is it?

The author's name was UltimateJusticeMachine. It had been posted the day before the swaps started. The perpetrator was not only a fan of gender swap fiction, Millmore realized, but an aspiring author! Millmore was thrilled. Find out who was logging into Fictionmadness, find out who was swapping Carl and Sunni.

Flashback over.

We return to the computer lab. Millmore looks through the search history. Thanks to Google and people being careless and not logging out of their accounts, Millmore can search through weeks of postings. He is disappointed to discover not a single visit to Fictionmadness in Kennedy's history, though there are many hits to a site called "Furries." Millmore hears the doorknob rattling. He looks up and sees a shadowy figure through the glass, about to enter. He exits out of the Browser History and slides three seats down, quickly looking nonchalant as he pretends to type as Kennedy enters and goes back to her computer.

Millmore wonders what it's like to be Kennedy, with that glowing skin, as he decides he might as well pop into Fictionmadness. He hits on a story set in what's called the Spells R' Us Universe. He begins to read.



## CHAPTER 9.

Carl sat outside the principal's office, where he'd been told to wait. He smoothed his skirt and tugged on the hem, wishing he could make it long enough to at least cover his thighs. Principal Sagamore's secretary was a very pretty, young woman named Connie, with big, brown eyes. Carl had crushed on her a little over the years. Now, she was pretending to look at her monitor while actually staring at his long, bare, sexy legs. Having a beautiful woman checking out his legs made Carl feel— small. Sitting in front of her in a too short skirt made him feel smaller. Sitting in front of her with his knees pressed together like any proper young lady made him feel like a tiny little bug that just wanted to run from the room screaming.

But he could not. So Carl put his hands in his lap and, brushing a stray strand of glittering blonde hair away from his cheek, he feigned fascination with the fish tank, his cheeks burning as Connie's eyes kept sweeping up and down his legs.

Finally, the door to Sagamore's Office swung open. A deep voice called from within: "Enter."

Carl stood, smoothing his skirt, then walked into the principal's office, ready to face his punishment. Connie watched him walk, impressed. He moved like a supermodel. She'd have to ask him for pointers sometime.

Sagamore sat, shrouded in shadows. A fire crackled in the open hearth, stone fireplace. On his desk, a sculpture of Ganesh. "Sit,"

he said.

Carl sat. He'd been relieved to get away from Connie, but his sense of feeling small and shamed did not diminish in the face of this deep voiced manly man. He once more tugged at his skirt.

"Why are you wearing a girl's uniform?"

Carl sighed. It was time to tell the truth. He would tell Sagamore what was really going on. Then, he would tell his mother. "Okay," he said. "So, well, it all started ...."

Carl chattered, telling the story in a completely non-linear way, and making many digressions, offering scathing commentary on *certain* hair bloggers who did NOT know what she was talking about.

Sagamore did not move or comment. He remained a statue carved in shadow.

Carl finished. "So, um, I mean, whatever!"

The room remained silent save for the popping of the burning logs. Sagamore seemed deep in thought. Finally, he leaned forward, his face now lit up red by the flickering flames. He had a pencil thin mustache and needy eyes. "You are a girl now," he said.

"Whaaa?" Carl squeaked back.

"Regulations clearly state that the female uniform is for females. Since you are now forced to wear a girls' uniform, it stands to reason you must now be a girl."

The thought of being called a "girl" terrified Carl. Indeed, it had been a playground taunt among the boys as long as he could remember. His own mother had chastised him not to "be a girl." He'd been taught, indeed, that there was nothing worse he could be than a "girl." "I'm not a girl," he said. "I assure you. I still have— you know."

“Miss Bright,” the principal said. “You are a girl now. Next topic. I think it best we do not involve outside authorities in this matter. The school’s reputation. You understand.”

“Um. okay, I didn’t actually agree to the whole I’m a girl now just because you say so? Saying I’m a girl because I’m wearing a skirt is so— sexist!”

Sagamore raised an eyebrow. “Young lady, be mindful of your tone. No one likes a girl who is shrill and demanding.”

“Young lady? Shrill? Demanding?” Carl’s skirt tugging grew more frantic. His voice rose to almost glass shattering pitches. “I’ll tell my daddy on you!”

“Just the thing a girl would say,” Sagamore said. “Men handle their own problems.”

“Men? Why... hmpf!” Carl crossed his legs— properly for a young lady.

“You want to be a boy? Find a way out of that skirt. Are we clear?”

Carl pushed out his lower lip. “Fine! May I go?”

“You are dismissed,” Sagamore said.

Carl got up. On his way of the outer office, Connie said, “Carl? One sec.”

Carl’s heart fluttered a little as he looked into those big, pretty eyes. “Yes?”

“Your walk is so graceful. What’s your secret?”

Carl huffed, turned on his pretty little shoes, and floated from the room.

Connie watched him go, thinking, “she’s a little stuck up.”

As Carl was exiting the office, he came eye to eye with Sunni.  
“You’re tall,” he said.

“Keen eye for observation you’ve got there,” Sunni said. Her eyes dropped to his blouse, and then...

Carl put his hands over the front of his skirt, trying to hide it in a sad effort so doomed to failure it could only make him seem like an airhead. Sunni loved seeing Carl wearing a girl’s uniform— they had often argued over whether it was sexist or not to make girls wear skirts, with Sunni pointing out the clothes’ lack of utility as well as the sexualization inherent in compelling girls to bare their legs . Carl’s response, an unusually obtuse one for a young man of such intellect, was usually, “girls wear skirts. That’s just the way it is.” One of the reasons, perhaps, that Carl had not managed to formulate a more compelling counter arguments, was due to the fact that he actually fully believed that forcing girls to wear skirts was a matter of making them— less than. In addition, he quite enjoyed the sight of a shapely pair of female legs, and the skirt seemed a quite excellent article of clothing for the display of a girl’s — gams.

Yet, as much as she was loving the sight of Carl with his Peter Pan collar, his pleated skirt, she was also quite amused and also puzzled at the sway of hip, and those legs! “You look cute,” she said. “Those shoes are adorable.”

Carl frowned. “Don’t start. Do you have any idea how humiliating this is for me?”

“Because you’re dressed like a girl? I’ve been doing it my whole life.”

“Well, duh! You are a girl! It’s so unfair! I’m stuck wearing a skirt, and you get to be tall?”



“You think I want to be tall?”

“It’s better than being a boy in a skirt!”

“Well, Carl, you once told me that girls wear skirts. You are wearing a skirt; therefore— “

“Uh!” Carl squeaked, throwing his head back and storming off, furious to hear Sunni making the same idiotic argument the principal had just made. Sunni watched him storm off, admiring how smooth and ladylike he walked. His legs were so pretty, and the way his skirt rode on his cute, round butt, swishing back and forth...

“Okay,” Sunni mumbled to herself. “Those are none of the things I am looking for in a boy!”

I would relate to you Sunni’s encounter with Sagamore in greater detail, but for the fact it was nearly identical to Carl’s. Sagamore explained that Sunni was now a boy. The idea of having someone else re-assign her gender identity shocked and offended her. She, unlike Carl, did not have a hissy fit, but merely expressed her objections to being declared boy in clear, simple and controlled tones. Sagamore ignored her and reminded her that no outside agencies should be involved in the matter. The school would investigate, and he had heard Millmore was on the case, so it was as good as solved, anyway. The meeting completed, Sunni stood, crossed the room and extended her hand. Sagamore stood. He was a full 3 inches shorter than Sunni, and as he looked up at her he found himself just a little intimidated by her thundering beard. He wondered if he should grow one as he reached out and shook Sunni’s hand, which was now much larger than his and— her grip was quite strong. He almost winced, but could not show weakness

in front of the students. “Good man,” he said. “Quite a grip you’ve got there.”

Sunni nodded and left, feeling quite pleased. Sagamore had hidden his flinch, but he hadn’t hidden the look of surprise in his eyes. Once more, as with her height, she felt- powerful. She wondered if she could kick Sagamore’s ass. Probably, she decided. He looked skinny fat.

Sagamore had his secretary send word to all the teachers of the new genders of his star students. They now referred to Carl as “Carli” or “Miss Bright” or “Young Lady.” He groaned, feeling like he grew smaller and smaller with every feminine address. The other kids picked up on it, calling, “Hey, *Carli*,” as he walked past them in the hall, just a little snooty taunt in their voices as they enjoyed seeing a boy made to wear a skirt and called by a girl’s name. Sunni was called— well, no one knew of a masculine equivalent for Sunni, so they called her Sunni. Once more, Carl felt utterly victimized. They did refer to her at times as Young Man or Mr. Linn, which irked Sunni, but having internalized sexist attitudes, many of the students did not feel like these terms lessened Sunni at all. They felt she had received a promotion. Besides— the beard. People were truly scared of that mighty beard.

Carl’s suffering continued after school. He’d struggled all day with the decision of whether to skip soccer practice. All he had in his gym bag were the tiny little nylon short shorts he’d been morphed into during gym class. He’d seen himself in them. He knew from the waist down he looked sexy as hell, and he dreaded the thought of what the other boys would say about— that ass. He especially dreaded confronting Matt Millmore. It would be hard, he understood,

to seem tough wearing a little pair of peach colored girl's shorts, especially when they fit his new shape so well. Matt would no doubt have a lot to say about Carl's pretty legs and firm, plump rump.

He was also— not ready— to deal with his mother over this latest change. He would have to admit he lied, for one thing, which was not going to go over well. He wanted to delay that scene as long as possible. He couldn't ask her to buy him a new pair of shorts. But, he decided, if he hustled, he might just be able to make it to BJ's— gross name for a store!— and grab a pair. As soon as school ended, Carl jumped in his car, gunned the engine and raced through the parking lot, even driving up on the sidewalk at one point, honking, scattering screaming kids so he could get around the other cars. "She's such an airhead," people said, watching Carl's crazy driving. He made it to BJ's, ran to the men's section, grabbed some baggy workout shorts and raced to the self-checkout, skirt bouncing. There was enough time. He would just make it!

Carl scanned the shorts. Pushed his debit card into the slot. *Approved. Please Remove Your Card.* Carl grabbed the card, heart racing, thrilled. He'd done it. He'd pulled it off. As soon as he picked up the shorts, they transformed in his hands into a pair of tiny little nylon girl's shorts— lime green.

"No! No! No!" He cried, turning them over, refusing to believe it.

"Miss?" The security guard said, walking towards him.

"I'm a boy!" Carl shrieked, running from the store, struggling to hold back tears of rage at what was being done to him.

As Carl got into his car, tossing the infernal shorts into the back seat, he made a decision. To heck with it. He owed it to the team. He owed it to himself. He'd made a commitment, and no matter how

embarrassing it was, he would just have to show up to practice in girl shorts. He raced back to campus, tires squealing as he ripped around the corner. He grabbed his gym bag and raced to the locker room, thinking he would go into one of the shower stalls to change so the other boys wouldn't see his panties. He burst into the locker room and pumped his fist. Finally, some luck! The other guys had already changed and headed to the field. He slipped out of his skirt and blouse, hanging them carefully in his locker- not even thinking about it. He felt ridiculous standing there in little white, cotton bikini panties, and he quickly stepped into the peach shorts, pulling them over his hips, feeling the fabric pull tight against his butt. He grabbed a tank top. Oh, no. It was fluency and feminine, with a plunging neckline and wide, open sleeves. No. No. He pushed through the things in his bag, humiliated to see sports bras, panties and more of those same girl tops. "Why!?" He shouted, pulling on the top, hoping it would hang down over his shorts at least, but it ended right at his waist.

No time to worry about it now. He looked at the clock. He had two minutes to make it to the soccer field. Running out the door, his hands in his hair as he tightened his bun, he saw the other boys stretching. Saw the coaches in a semi-circle off to the side. He ran hard, getting into line with the other guys, grabbing one of his feet and stretching his long legs. He could sense the eyes of the other guys on him. He ignored it.

Coach made a chagrined face and walked over. "Carli. What are you doing here?"

"Practice, coach," Carl said, confused. He was, of course, irritated to be referred to as Carli, but that was just— well, he would

just have to accept it for now.

“Girls practice over on the softball field,” Coach said.

“Girls? But— “

“We all got the memo, Carli. You’re a girl now. Better scoot on over there with the other girls.”

He heard the boys laughing, their deep, manly laughs cutting into him. “You heard him, Carli,” Matt shouted. “You belong with the ladies.”

Carl turned, steamed, wanted to make a comeback, to shout something back, but his voice seemed to just lock up. He had no words. He shot Coach a wounded— et tu?— look and trotted off toward the softball field.

“That ass, though—“one of the guys said.

“Knock it off!” Coach yelled. He blew his whistle. “Let’s go. Let’s go!”

Carl glanced back over his shoulder as he ran, seeing the boys growing smaller and smaller in the distance behind him. His heart sank. He’d been a member of the team since Freshman year. He knew all those guys, and he’d been expecting to have great memories of his senior year, going to war with them one more time. Now, to be demoted to the girls’ team— and to him it was a demotion — it was almost enough to bring him to tears. He may even have cried had he not seen Sunni jogging toward him. She was dressed as a guy— baggy knee length shorts, a muscle shirt that read Hawks.

Sunni shook her head ruefully as she passed him. “Can you believe this?”

“No!” Carl said. Once more, he couldn’t help but feel Sunni was getting an upgrade. He never considered that she was just as attached to her teammates, just as hurt to find herself expelled from HER team. To Carl, it was like she’d gotten called up from the Junior Varsity, and he seethed with jealousy.

The girls had circled up, and as Carl jogged up and took a place in the circle, Coach Becky finished what she’d been saying and turned her attention to Carl. “Okay, girls. Let’s welcome the newest Lady Hawk, Carli Bright!”

The girls clapped, but Carl could see resentment and suspicion in their eyes. “She,” Patty Smyth said, “will NOT be changing in the girls’ locker room, I hope!”

“Why not?” Kennedy said, and for a moment Carl felt blessed that she was standing up for him. Then, she added, “She has a better ass than you.”

“Um, I don’t want to change in the girls’ locker room,” Carl said. “Okay?”

“Hey, hey, hey,” Coach Becky said. “Shut it down. This is practice. Lady Hawks on three. One. Two. Three!”

It took an act of will, and Carl grimaced, but he shouted, “Lady Hawks,” along with the girls. If he couldn’t be a part of the boys’ team, he *had* to be part of the girls. The competition with Sunni was so tight. He couldn’t afford to lose one of his major sports. The competition for valedictorian was all important.

As the team broke and separated to work on position drills, Carl felt a little ray of sunshine in what had been a dark day. A lot of the girls wore outfits just like his— short shorts, flouncy tank tops. It made him feel a little like he belonged.

The boys, meanwhile, wanted to make sure Sunni knew she didn't belong. Young men frequently are not in touch with their emotions. They feel but they do not understand. So, as coach introduced Sunni, they stared at her in anger, many of them thinking they were experiencing hate. In fact, hate is the mask of fear, and the terrible new fear gripping every single boy on the team was simple: that they would be bested in physical competition by a girl.

Still? You may ask. Even in the 21st Century? Yes. Still. Particularly in physical competitions, sports of any kind, it was vitally important to a man that he believed at all times he was the superior physical specimen. How can this be, we may wonder, when any rational man must realize that Serena Williams would easily dominate him on the tennis court? When there are female gymnasts who perform athletic feats far beyond the abilities of the average male? When women compete in weightlifting and throw up weight that a typical boy— or, even man— cannot lift unless he, too, is a lifter?

Closer to home, were there not within the very confines of Carrolwood, girls on the softball team who could throw with greater velocity than many boys? Girls who could out leap, out run, even hurl a discuss to greater distances than most males?

Indeed. All true. But the male mind is adept at denial as well as wistful fantasy, and despite all evidence to the contrary, each and every boy at Carrolwood still believed himself to be physically superior to girls. This delusion was aided and abetted by a belief among the females that while it was okay to compete with boys, ultimately it was necessary to let boys win, as they were quite

sensitive and insecure and seemed to suffer terribly when a girl proved herself superior even at such a ridiculous game as Foosball.

Let us add to this emotional cauldron the fact that Sunni, with her thunder beard, her thunder voice and her now dominant height, made them all feel— well— a but feminine, which further stoked their fear. It is a truly terrible thing for a boy to meet a woman who makes him feel a bit like a girl, and thus we had Sunni's dilemma.

Sunni was not focused on the boys and their insecurity. She was too busy dealing with her own. She felt awkward and weird, embarrassed to be a boy. She did not notice the looks that passed among the boys, the silent agreement: make her quit.

They practiced hard. Physical. Sunni found herself checked, blocked, pushed. Kicked. Taunted. "Show me what ya got! Come on!" She kicked. The boy blocked. "Weak," she heard them muttering. "Slow." "Soft." With her new height and greater mass, she soon found herself bodying into boys, pushing them. She was an excellent player, and her skills had not left her. As she grew used to her new height, she moved more and more aggressively. Seeing the way they were playing her, realizing the boys had thought to bully and intimidate her, she fought right back. A feminist, she didn't believe in making herself small in the name of male pride. So, she showed them she was tough, and she showed them she could compete. And she showed them they should probably not engage her in psychological warfare.

Chris Grant stumbled, planting his hands in the turf to keep from falling completely over. It left him in a V, with his ass in the air. "Nice ass, Chrissy!" Sunni yelled, giving it a slap. Chris yelped in surprise.



“Oh, you look so cute, Donna,” Sunni shouted as Don tried to steal the ball. Sunni dribbled it past him, kicked it over to her teammate who launched it into the net— scored. Sunni turned back to Don. “Show me that pretty smile!”

The alpha on the team was now Matt Manning. So, Sunni started to work on him. She decided to nickname him “Bambi,” finding ways to work it into her taunts. “You run like a fawn, Bambi. Come on!” Or, “are you wearing blush or just embarrassed, Bambi?”

Bambi. Bambi.

The coaches watched it all. Perhaps, they would have put a stop to it but for two reasons. One, they’d seen how the team had ganged up on Sunni, and they were actually quite impressed that she’d fought back. In addition, the intensity of the practice had grown and grown, with the guys trying harder than ever. They liked the effort she inspired.

Toward the end of practice, Matt had enough, though. He walked right up to Sunni and got in her face. “You wanna go?” He said. “Let’s do it right now.”

“Yeah?” Sunni said, getting right into his. “Take your best shot.”

The coaches rushed onto the field and pushed them apart. “Break it up. Break it up.”

Sunni glared at Matt. He glared back. And, just like that, they settled it. Respect. Mutual. Done.

And what of Carl with the long blonde hair?

“I hope you don’t think you’re going to just waltz in here and become a starter,” Cassidy was saying to Carl while they waited their

turn at the cone drill.

What's this? Carl wondered. Trash talk from a girl? "I'm better than you," Carl said. "So, like, um, yeah?"

"You think you're better just because you're a boy?" Jennifer said with a snort.

Uh, oh. Carl realized that he was on dangerous ground. It probably would not help him meld with his new teammates— inferior though they were— for him to swan in like some diva and act like he thought he was better than them. His father had told him since T-ball; never act like you are better than your teammates.

"I— um— I mean that I'm going to work as hard as anyone on this team. I'll earn what I get, kay?"

"You sound like such an airhead," Dana said.

"He does, right?" Holly added.

"He has a nicer ass than half of us."

"Why are you wearing girls' shorts, Carli?"

"I think he wants to be a *girl*."

Oh, how the comments curdled and ate at the young man's confidence. Carl was not used to be bullied by girls. He was used to having them swoon over him. Further, like all good taunts, these were rooted in truth. He did sound more feminine than most— actually, than any girl on the team. And he had an ass like a panty model, he could not deny that as much as it shamed him. To hear these girls, though, talking about his newly womanly shape, made him want to puke. He was a young man, and he did not want girl's feeling jealous of his hot ass.

Still. What to do. The dynamic was quite different from what Sunni faced. The boys assumed she was inferior. The girls

assumed Carl thought he was better than them, and they were out to prove otherwise.

The solution for Carl was, as it turned out, similar but different. He needed to show his new teammates that he respected them. He practiced as hard as he could. But, he made a point to high five and fist bump his teammates when they did well. Seeing the other girls encouraged each other, he found himself clapping and shouting, "Yes!"

By the end of practice, the taunts had slowed, and he could sense that more and more, his teammates were inching toward grudging acceptance. Carl, exhausted, collapsed on the grass. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, he thought, being just one of the girls. He stretched his long shapely legs out in front of him, crossed at the ankles. It was so strange to look down and see those legs. To know they were his legs.

Kennedy, who had risen to Queen Bee in Sunni's absence, jogged over and gave Carl a fist bump. "Not bad," she said with a wink, "for a guy."

"Haha!" Carl sang back, pleased with the approval. If Kennedy accepted him, the other girls would follow suit.



## CHAPTER TEN.

Carl felt his skirt flip up, cool air against his booty. He shrieked and pushed it down. "Idiot!" He screamed.

Dan retreated, laughing as he ran away.

"Ugh!" Carl huffed, thinking, *boys!*

Dan had been merciless. The sight of big bro, the one who'd bullied him his whole life, wearing a skirt and with those legs? And not just a skirt but a blouse? A whole girl's uniform? It was too much.

Mom was not much help. "My eldest son," she said in disgust. "I hate seeing you dressed like this," she said. "And, I am so disappointed that you lied to me. Has becoming a girl also made you into a pretty little liar?"

Carl had no answer. He hung his head in shame. Trying to get some sense of his self back, he'd asked Dad if he wanted to play catch. They hadn't done it as much the last couple of years, but there had been a time when his Dad spent hours working with Carl on his fielding skills. "Hey. That would be great. Some other time, okay? Dan and I are going to working on his curveball."

"Kay," Carl had said. Dan was sitting across the room playing video games. He gave Carl a triumphant smirk. Carl turned away, shocked to realize he'd been supplanted. It got worse. The family had planned to go out to dinner. They usually went out once a week as a family thing. The plans had been cancelled. No one said why, but Carl knew it was because they were embarrassed to be seen with him in public. It further intensified his sense of shame. Indeed,

he was starting to hate himself. It hurt in a way he'd never experienced to be— an embarrassment. And it wasn't his fault!

Carl went back to his room and pulled the door closed, just wanting to be alone. He'd come up right after school thinking to change out of his skirt, but the pants he had to choose from now were worse. He'd slipped out of his skirt and grabbed a pair of jeans from a hanger in the closet. Jeans! He'd thought. Yes! You can call 'em girl jeans, but jeans were jeans.

Jeans, he soon learned, were not jeans. The first thing he noticed was— tight. They seemed really tight. They were made of some kind of stretchy material, so he was able to get them on— hopping up and down, wiggling his hips to pull them over the new curves, and then when he buttoned the impossibly small waist button around his impossibly small waist, he felt like a sausage. He walked over to his mirror, all his worst fears confirmed. It was like wearing a pair of yoga pants. They hugged his long, round legs and celebrated that firm, lifted behind. It was almost like being naked. Worse than the skirt, he felt, because while he certainly had noticed the cute way the skirt rode on his butt, it also didn't reveal it in quite such an enticing way as his jeans.

So, he'd switched back to his skirt and gone back downstairs, never having imagined in a million years he would have to contend with stupid Dan flipping his stupid skirt!

Now, back in his room, he curiously examined his new wardrobe. His closet was all jeans, dresses, skirts and blouses. There were some cute t-shirts neatly pressed and hanging as well. Some were not terrible— a sleeveless Ramones shirt, The Misfits. Thank God girl culture had embraced punk. They were sleeveless and made of

a thinner, softer material than most boys' shirts, but at least it wasn't Ariana Grande. Oh, wait. There was an Ariana Grande shirt. Well, he would never wear it!

He glanced at the dresses, quickly turning away. There was NO WAY he would ever wear a dress.

Back in his bedroom, Carl looked through his dresser. The top drawer was full of bras—the sight of them made his heart race. Ever since he'd hit puberty he'd been turned on by the sight of a bra strap, a lacy cup. He touched one such lacy cup now, remembering the time he'd cupped Jenny Walsh's breasts over the cup, the feel of it... He picked up the bra by the shoulder straps and looked at it, all those lingering male desires flaring, even as that new terror emerged, the fear that he would soon have breasts, that he would need a bra—this bra.

He dropped it back in the drawer. Sifted through the others. Lots of cute, pretty bras. Lots of practical ones as well. Some of them looked almost like compression shirts—Not that different from the things some guys wore when they trained.

The next drawer made him gasp. Panties. All little, feminine things. Carl remembered, suddenly, that he was wearing panties, and his flickering sense of masculinity further wilted. As with bras, Carl LOVED the sight of a girl in panties and had spent many hours on the web scrolling through pictures of girls in them, drooling. He was wearing them now. He was. Wearing. Panties. It just wasn't right.

Some, as in the case of his bras, were practical. Some very sexy. Just little patches of lace, dental floss in the back. Looking at them brought memories of gorgeous women, smiling, a hand on a

hip, or their ass sticking out... and now they were his. Oh, my God! He thought. He could NEVER let anyone know about this! What if Dan found out big bro was wearing a pair of little cotton panties? He would be dead. Destroyed.

He looked through more drawers. There were thermal pajama bottoms. He didn't even know what they were called, but there were camisoles. Slips. Yoga pants. Carl shivered at the thought of going outside in a pair of those. With his ass? NO WAY! The boys would be— he didn't even want to think about it. And shorts. Little denim jeans shorts, another item of clothing he LOVED to see a sexy girl squeeze herself into. Carl looked over some of the t-shirts again. In addition to the Ramones, there was Wonder Woman, Girl Power, Notorious RBG...

Hmmmmn. These— were these Sunni's clothes? He got his phone and laying on his back, he texted her:

I think I have your clothes. Smiley Face.

Same. Frowny Face.

Keeps getting worse.

I Know.

Carl giggled. She was sooo funny.

See ya.

Bye.

Stretching, Carl went to his mirror and started pulling the hairpins out, letting his hair down. Once he'd shaken it out, he took his brush and started to carefully run it through his hair, counting each stroke.



One. Two. Three. He knew he needed 100 to keep it bright and shiny. Carl liked brushing his hair. It was pretty and soft, and the act put him into a kind of calming, meditative trance. Four. Five. Six. He also used the time to consider how to style his hair next. By the time he finished brushing, he'd decided to wear it down. Just for something, ya know, different?



## CHAPTER 11

The next morning, Carl woke an hour earlier than usual. He snapped awake, looked at the clock and thought— why? Pulling his covers over his head, he tried to go back to sleep, but after just a couple minutes he realized it was no use. He was alert. Energized.

He could make use of the extra time. Maybe hit the books. More urgently, he needed to take a leak, so he slipped into the little silk floral print robe that had replaced his beloved terry cloth, slipped his feet into the fuzzy bunny slippers, and creeping as quietly as he could so as not to wake evil Dan — who would LOVE seeing Carl like this— he made his way to the bathroom, flipped the light switch, pulled the door closed and SCREAMED.

Staring back at Carl from the bathroom mirror was a beautiful female face, and though he knew it was now his face, he still found himself touching his cheeks, moving closer to the mirror, big, innocent doe eyes wide, pretty mouth hanging open.... “No... no... no....” He whispered. “Oh, God no.” She— he— was super model beautiful: A full mouth that begged to be kissed, a tiny little hint of an upturned nose, a narrow, cute little chin, glowing, radiant skin. His feminine and perfectly shaped eyebrows looked like they been sculpted in a salon. His was an utterly feminine face— the kind that almost looked like a child’s face, one that radiated vulnerability, naiveté, and— submissiveness. It was a face that perfectly matched Carl’s Barbie Doll voice, it’s innate beauty only further glamorized by the thick waves of golden hair that framed it.

Oh, I must add, there was one thing that had not changed. The little mole on his cheek. Which, of course, would now be known as a

beauty mark.

He heard footsteps in the hall. “You okay?” Dad whispered.

“Yeah,” Carl said, trying to keep his voice calm. “Um, I slipped. But I’m fine.”

“Good. Okay. Keep it down.”

The footsteps retreated. Carl covered his face, wishing, praying that it would go away, but when he separated his fingers and peeked at himself, it had not changed.

Carl took a quick shower. Then, he hurried back to his room, consumed with anxiety about the day, what it would mean to face the school with his new innocent doll face. As he closed the door, considering that he might wear a mask of some sort, his eyes were drawn to the table where he’d set up all his hair care materials. His eyes went wide, and he felt his heart flutter.

His pins and bows and clips had now been joined by tubes and jars and compacts. Makeup! *Omigod*, he thought, going over, opening a container of pearly pink blush. It smelled pretty! His eyes played across his make-up collection, and he realized that he now loved make-up, loved making up his face, trying out different looks. But no. Here, he drew the line. He would NEVER wear makeup. It was a bright line between boy and girl and one that he would not cross! He had no choice with his clothes and his hair— well— he had to do something with it, but he would NOT wear make-up. He got dressed. Today, he slipped into a soft, pretty little camisole to wear under his blouse, and he added a pair of knee high socks like a lot of the girls wore, but otherwise it was the same uniform as the day before.

Sitting, he did his hair. He was wearing it down, but that didn't mean he wouldn't need hair pins to keep those bangs out of his face, and he also pinned it back at the temples. And... he kept glancing at his tubes of eyeliner. Really? He asked himself. Well, he was trying to fit in with the girls now, and, well, most of them wore a little light makeup. Maybe he would seem stuck up, he reasoned, if he acted like he was too good to put on a little lip gloss?

As he was debating, he dabbed a little oil free moisturizer on his fingertips and then rubbed it between his fingertips, warming it before spreading it over his face. While he let the moisturizer set, he looked over his lip gloss collection, picked up a tube of Cover Girl Shine Free Glow Primer. Unlike with his hair, he seemed to have an instinctive knowledge of makeup. Primer, he reasoned, really wasn't even makeup. It was something a girl wore under her makeup. He knew, of course, that a lot of girls wore it **as** makeup, but, well, I mean, really?

He put a little primer on his fingers, warmed it, applied it evenly across his face. Smiled. It did reduce the shine while, paradoxically, giving him a warmer glow. It wasn't even makeup, he insisted to himself. So, like, what was the big deal? He'd read somewhere there were guys wearing primer. It was a thing. He was just—trendy. He had picked up the eyeliner as those thoughts passed through his mind, and he'd sketched it across the base of his right eye before he even realized what he was doing.

He remembered his vow not to wear makeup. He stopped. What am I doing? He looked at himself. I can't go to school with one eye half done, he decided. That would be so dumb. Mascara followed. Lip gloss that made his big, plush lips even bigger looking and more

inviting, and then he was using a camelhair brush to dust a little of that pretty, pink blush into his cheeks. It was just a touch. No one would even notice he was wearing it, he told himself. But they would notice his cheek bones! Finally, he used a dab of mascara to highlight his beauty mark.

Carl looked at his phone to check the time. Wha! It has taken him *forever* to do his face! He had to hurry now and eat a quick bite, or he would be late. *Thank God I woke up so early*, he thought.

Sunni, meanwhile, slept an hour later than usual. Th family cat, Ripple, had sat on the windowsill, wagging her tale with languorous ease as she listened, fascinated, to the rumbling snores coming from Sunni's mouth. An intelligent cat, Ripple had noticed the changes in Sunni— her favorite among these humans who served her— and she was quite certain that Sunni was turning into a Tom. She wondered if Sunni, like the Toms she knew, would soon be girl crazy. Sunni's phone started buzzing, and Ripple hopped off the sill and ran to the door to Sunni's room, pawing at it. She was due a visit to her sandbox of smelly.

Sunni yawned, rolled out of bed, scratched her butt. Farted.

"Rrarrwww."

"I know," Sunni grumbled, going to the door and letting the cat out. Time to get ready, Sunni thought, making her way blearily to the bathroom. Looking in the mirror, she could see that her eyebrows had gotten bushier and her nose more prominent. She noted with a pang of regret that her eyelashes were no longer long and curly, but stubby. Her face, what she could see of it, had changed. It annoyed her, but compared to the Birth of Beard, it seemed like not that

much. She regretted being less pretty, but again, pretty had pretty much gone bye, bye when she'd gotten her whole lumberjack beard.

She shit, showered and did not shave. Pulled on her uniform. Tied her tie. Ran a hand through her now short, spiked hair. Done, she thought, heading downstairs. *It sure is easy to be a guy*, she thought. She wondered how Carl was doing with his morning routine. *It probably took him more time just to do his hair*, Sunni thought, *than it took me to get completely ready. Oh, well!*

Sunni checked her phone for messages as she wandered into the kitchen. Not as many as usual. She felt sad. She was being left out. She could sense the distance growing between her and her friends.

"There's my big, strong man," Mom said.

"Um, okay," Sunni said, getting a container of Greek yogurt from the fridge.

"Morning," Dad said gruffly, not even looking up from his Ipad. He'd been quite freaked out when Sunni had come home, now standing three inches taller. All his insecurities had enflamed as his little pumpkin looked down at him, scratching that insane beard monster, which now met him at eye level. He'd had to crane his neck back to look at her, and now? His wife calling Sunni her big, strong man? It was too much.

Reader, do you see it? The seething cauldron of Freudian tension building in our little triad? For all their long years as a family, it had been a triumvirate of father-mother-daughter. They had settled into this dynamic. Now, suddenly, it was father-mother-son, and every aspect of the relationship had been sliced, diced and

turned into a salad. Yes. The Oedipus complex had come to stay with the Linns! And, having not naturally grown into and dealt with the tensions created by Oedipal forces, they were now all, in scientific terms, a little looney.

In the Oedipus complex, you will recall, the son becomes a threat to the father for the mother's affections. The theory goes so far as to suggest the son will even have the unconscious desire to kill the father and replace him. We may not go so far in Sunnis' case—yet. But clearly her mother was now a bit smitten with the big, manly boy she had for a son, while the father certainly had unresolved fears that his daughter was about to replace him as the man of the house. All that tension simmered right there at the kitchen table as they ate in silence. They all felt it, but they did what so many families do, and simply said nothing in the hopes these disturbing new feelings would just go away.

Sunni finished eating. And now, completely unaware, she tossed some fuel on the fire. Getting up, she put her arms around her mother's shoulders and kissed her on the head. "Love you, Mom."

"Love you, too," Mom answered, her voice a little higher, younger, bordering on a giggle. "You don't need a ride?"

"I told you. Riding in with Matt today."

Sunni then nodded toward her father and said, "Be good." She headed out to school, thinking nothing of it.

Dad seethed. His wife had used her "flirting frequency" with Sunni! That—he hadn't heard that voice in years. And then, for her to say, "Be Good," to him? That was something a man said to a woman. Certainly not something daughter said to her father. "She's getting a little full of herself," he grumbled.



“Oh, don’t be silly,” Mom said.

*Don’t be silly?* Dad felt himself getting smaller, less relevant. *They are all against me*, he grumbled to himself as he headed off to work. *I need to remind them I am the King, and this is my castle.*

Mom watched him stalk off. No kiss goodbye? She noted. Hmmm. It’s too bad he can’t be more like Sunni! Sunni’s birthday was coming up. She would turn 18! Mom and Dad had argued about what to get her, but Mom made up her mind right then and there she was going to get Sunni her own car. It was about time. And if Dad didn’t like it? Too bad.

Matt came roaring up in his classic, coke bottle Corvette. It was black, sleek. Sunni had always wanted to ride in it, though in her fantasies it did not go down the way it was about to happen. She climbed in. They fist bumped.

“Bro,” Matt said.

“Dude,” Sunni answered.

Matt turned up the music. Bartholomew by The Silent Comedy. They bobbed their heads as they drove along. The whole thing with Matt was so weird to Sunni. If she’d gotten into a fight like that with a girl, they would have stayed mad at each other for at least three months. But, it seemed with guys, they just let it go.

Carl, meanwhile, found himself a sensation. As he floated down the hall, people froze. Conversations abruptly ended. Most stared in wonder at the angelic face descended among them. Amidst the eerie silence, someone muttered, “omigod” another whispered, “so

pretty.” But most were struck dumb, feeling themselves in the presence of the sublime, like an art lover gazing in wonder as the Sistine Chapel climbed down from the roof and decided to take a stroll around Rome. They wished to a one that he would pause in front of them, allow them to marvel at his radiance, and then sighed in agony when the angel floated past, long golden hair swishing down her back. Carl, himself, could only smile, nod. He felt like a firefly in a bottle, everyone just— looking at him. He’d seen his face. He got it, and yet he did not want it. No. This was too much attention for all the wrong reasons. People stared and were in awe of him because he had the face of such a beautiful girl.

“I wish people would get a grip!” Carl fumed as he went to his locker, immediately checking his hair and makeup. Carl had left his locker open at an angle, so he could see down the hall using the mirror he’d hung on the inside of the door. He liked to see what was going on, and he noted— ugh!— that there were guys checking out his legs. Then, he saw Matt Manning coming down the hall with Sunni— he recognized her by her beard. My two greatest enemies! Carl thought, noting that Matt’s eyes dropped to his butt and then slithered down his legs. It made Carl’s skin crawl and he shivered. He thought he should turn and say hi to Sunni. Part of him was pained at the idea, and she would no doubt make some comment about his glamorous face. I mean, how could she not? Well, I might as well get it over with, he decided. Carl could not admit to himself that part of him very much wanted Sunni to see how pretty he looked now.

Carl moved his hair to one side, turned to look back over his shoulder at Sunni, plastering a big, bright smile on his face. “Hi,

Sunni!" He said, making his voice even smaller and higher.

"What's up?" Sunni said, barely even looking at him as she walked past, dead-eyed.

Matt's mouth dropped open and his face reddened. He quickly looked away, clearing his throat.

Carl's mouth dropped open as well. *What's up?* That was all the reaction he got? *She is so full of herself!* He thought, slamming his locker shut. He had half a mind to run after her and tell her just what he thought of her and her stupid beard!

But, just in time to save poor Carl from himself, his new bestie, Kennedy, came bopping up to his locker, touching his hair and then giving him a hug. "Omigod!" She said, admiring his face. "You are such a hot ass bitch!"

"Language!" Professor Acute said as he walked by, struggling to tear his eyes from Carl's stunning face.

"I can't believe I look like this," Carl said. "It's so embarrassing!"

"Please," Kennedy said, once more playing with his hair. "You're so embarrassed you put on mascara?" She grabbed his hand. "Come on. I want to show you to the rest of the girls."

Carl allowed himself to be dragged along, smiling and saying "hi" to everyone as they passed. He'd learned the other day not to come across as superior, and he wanted everyone to know that just because he had the prettiest face in the whole school, well, he was still just Carli from down the street!

While Carl found himself surrounded by chattering girls, Sunni hung with the guys. It was not at all what she was used to. Flat, monotone voices. Blank faces. She felt like she was talking with a group of zombies. The conversational threads sounded like this:

"I hear H Academy is good this year."

"Goalie is good. Played with him in summer league."

Silence. Eye prowling the girls.

"We're better."

Silence. Eyes prowling the girls.

Bell rings.

"Later."

Sunni's natural instinct was to jump in and try to get everyone talking, bring up topics that might get them excited, like— but what? The "me, too" movement? Wonder Woman as problematic feminist icon? Taylor Swift's new record? Ryan Gosling's new girlfriend? Sunni did not know what got guys talking— other than girls- and she was not ready to offer her thoughts of Kennedy going up a cup size. Which, even as she thought it, didn't sound like the WAY a boy would talk about Kennedy's— bongos? It seemed, Sunni realized, that boys were fine with what to her seemed dead, low-energy conversation, but she did resolve to spend some time researching proper etiquette when talking with other boys. She really was not sure when to grunt.

When lunchtime came, Carl got his food and headed over toward his usual group of friends. They looked scared. He thought it was kind of cute. They'd always been shy around girls, and though he wasn't really a girl, well, with this face? *Maybe he could help them get over their anxiety when it came to girls*, he thought. That would at least make this a little bit—

"Carli! Hey! Over here!"

Carl looked to see Kennedy waving him toward her table. The whole Lady Hawks soccer team was there, eating together, bonding. His heart sank. Pete and Lee called. “Dude!” Carl looked from his guy friends to the girls on his team. He knew what he had to do. He turned and headed over to join the rest of the Lady Hawks. “Hey, Carli,” they greeted him. “Hey.” Carl glanced over at his old friends. They looked really— sad? Carl felt bad, but what was he supposed to do?

Sunni watched it all from her seat at the back wall, where she’d taken her position next to Matt. Of course, she made sure not to let Carl catch her watching him. Seeing all the girls greeting Carl, seeing how pretty he looked now, how he smiled, hooking his hair behind his ear... She seethed with jealousy. She liked all her friends- well, most of— her friends on the team. Now, somehow, they were all friends with Carl? It was so UNFAIR!

Sunni turned her attention to Matt and the guys. She’d found she really didn’t have to do much but grunt and occasionally chuckle at something they said to fit in. She would just ignore Carl. And yet, she kept glancing over, seeing the girls talking, watching Carl smiling, tossing his hair. Her anger built and built and smoldered and blazed into an inferno.

As lunch hour wound down, Sunni waited in the hall for Carl. As soon as he came out of the lunchroom and separated from the rest of the girls, heading off to class, Sunni charged. Seeing Sunni coming, Carl tossed his hair. It was about time she noticed him. Sunni marched up and pushed him, as per her usual greeting. “You can’t steal my friends!”

“Unh! As if!” Carl squealed. “You don’t own them!”

“They’re my friends!” Sunni said. “Stop— stealing my life!”

“Stealing? Stop being such a bitch!”

“Did you just call me the B-word?” Sunni bellowed. “Why would you even want to be on the girls’ team? You should quit.”

“So, you can be valedictorian? Dream on.”

“Oh, please. I’m going to win anyway. You told me yourself the girls’ team is really just JV.” That taunt, suggesting the inferiority of the girls, had indeed been issued by Carl, who had never imagined he would one day find himself a Lady Hawk.

“For your information,” Carl said in his sassiest voice, knowing there were girls listening. “The girls’ team is better than the boys’ team, and I should know.”

“Ha? Better? We would destroy you!”

The warning bell rang. Carl planted one hand on his hip and once more tossed his hair. “You’re just mad because I’m prettier than you.”

“Airhead!” Sunni spat, heading off to class. “This isn’t over.”

“Maybe for you it isn’t,” Carl said, neatly turning on his Mary Janes and gliding away, his lady like poise un-frazzled. “Hey, Holly! Hey, Kate!”

Sunni slammed her locker open. Grabbed her books.

“Girls” Matt said. “Am I right?”

“The worst,” Sunni agreed.

The girls in the hall watched it all. The chatter started. “Oh, my God. They are so crushing on each other!”

Millmore had spent the lunch hour investigating. He'd snuck into Ahmad's locker, searching for clues. None. Just the usual, sloppy and disorganized locker of a typical high-school boy. Scratch another suspect off the list. Millmore, meanwhile, had added to his media consumption. In addition to his still feverish delving into the deep archive of stories on FictionInsanity, he'd discovered the video works of one Miss Mako. He'd watched *Paradox Alice* three times.

As he wandered away from Ahmad's locker, Millmore decided to revisit the profile he'd made of the culprit. He felt like there was—something—he'd missed. Perhaps his deepening knowledge of TG fiction would allow him to make a more precise analysis.





## CHAPTER 12

Carl walked to theater practice with a couple other girls from the cast, chatting amiably about how the show was coming along, how much they liked Mrs. Calloway. As soon as they walked through the doors to the auditorium, however, Sunni pounced.

"Excuse us," Sunni said to the girls, taking Carl's arm and pulling him to the side.

The girls obeyed the beard and scampered away, calling "see you later" to Carl.

"Let go of me," Carl said, yanking his arm free from Sunni's grasp.

"My bad. I don't even know what I'm doing anymore."

"What do you want?"

"After lunch. It was not cool."

"Is that supposed to be an apology?"

"Yeah."

"Fine," Carl said, turning to walk away.

Sunni grabbed his arm again. Carl looked down at her hand, then at her. Raised a slender eyebrow. "Yeah. Right." Sunni let go.

"Can we talk for minute?" Sunni found herself fascinated with Carl's face. She'd never seen someone so pretty in real life. Her eyes played across his features, as she fought between jealousy and awe.

Carl felt... something odd happening inside him, having her look at him like that. Butterflies in his tummy... tingly feelings all over his body... "Don't look at me like that."

Sunni pulled her eyes away, looked back, maintaining eye contact. She also felt weird. Tingly. She stared into his eyes. They were so big and innocent looking, and he had long, curly lashes...

"I wanted to tell you something," Sunni said. She was finding it harder and harder to express her feelings, especially because she wasn't even sure anymore what she was feeling. "I just— I mean—" she reached out, meaning to touch Carl's cheek. They both felt a spark.

"I have to go!" Carl said, spinning and running away.

"Wait!" Sunni called, but she could only watch as Carl fled, his long blonde hair swaying behind him. Sunni felt anger and frustration building in her. She just wanted him to listen for a minute. She felt like she had something important to tell him, though she wasn't even sure what that was. The director called everyone to the stage. Rehearsal was beginning. Sunni sighed in frustration.

That night, Carl lay on his bed, his long blonde hair spread out around him, a few strands trailing off the side of his bed like a waterfall. He held his smart pad with both hands, trying to study. The moment he'd had with Sunni kept popping into his head: her staring into his eyes, her hand, reaching toward his cheek... the surging of feelings and the terror he'd felt... As much as the feelings scared him, he also found himself — loving them? A little? If that makes sense? He kept pushing the memory away, focusing back on Economics... but it kept coming back... coming back... He set his smart pad down, sighing. He closed his eyes, remembering the scene... the way Sunni had been looking at him, her eyes hard and — hot— and her hand... He imagined he had not run. She had

touched his cheek... and it felt so good, and she tilted his head slightly to the side, taking control and it was— thrilling to have her take control, to move his face. He closed his eyes and parted his lips because he knew that was what she wanted, and then he felt her lips on his, her bristly beard against his soft cheek...

Carl sat up with a squeak. "What the hell?"

Carl covered his eyes. Sighed. *Millmore needs to solve this*, he decided. *And now!*

Would it surprise the reader to know that Sunni had found herself haunted by the very same fantasy? She too had found her efforts to study distracted by the memory of her confusing moment with Carl. The way his eyes sparkled. The soft blush of his cheeks. The way his pupils had dilated when she'd reached toward his cheek, the quick little intake of breath... and she imagined, too, their first kiss... Carl melting into her arms...

"Dude, get a grip." She decided to go for a run. Ease off the tension. It was dark. Once, her parents would have refused to allow her to go running alone after dark. But, maybe another advantage of her changes, they didn't seem so worried anymore. She didn't know if she was totally okay with that. She was still a girl, after all, albeit one with a beard. As much as she'd rebelled at times against their over-protectiveness, she now kind of missed it.

*Millmore needs to solve this*, she thought. *And now.*



## CHAPTER 13

“Solved!” Millmore shouted as he leapt into the air, throwing a fist up like Super Mario. “Of course. Of course. It’s so obvious.” He chuckled. *I’ll get a confession tomorrow after school*, he decided, as it was a bit late in the evening.

Sitting back down at the Coleco Computer he’d modified to 21st Century standards, mostly by harvesting parts from an abandoned Nasa Robot, he puzzled over what to read next. The new Comic by TG Trini-tayh on the alluring website, TG Graphic Novels and Musings? Or, perhaps the latest offering from Joe 12 Pack? While trying to decide between the two remarkable sources of excellence, he took a quick spin by the Deviant Art page of meowwithus, enjoying the latest diabolical gender swapping tricks of the notorious Amy. She was quite the little scamp. As he looked over the panels of a new sequence in which a man’s ex-girlfriend turns him into a bride, Millmore thought, *I wish my little sister would turn me into a girl...*

*Sort of. Not really. Maybe?*



## CHAPTER 14

Carl got up early and did his hair. Put on his fresh faced, no make-up makeup look. He got dressed. It was still disconcerting to look in the mirror and see himself wearing a skirt, long, pretty hair and— that face. Hopefully, this would all be over soon. He'd had another dream where he and the guys had been hanging out— this time at the old quarry— diving and swimming, and once more Carl had popped out a pair of boobies, climbing out of the water....

Carl determined that he would definitely not be going near any pools of water any time soon.

Sunni combed her beard. Ran her hand through her short spikey hair. Done. She looked in the mirror— she'd had to raise the mirror so it didn't cut her image off at the neck— and frowned. She did not like the sight of herself. She looked so— mean— it made people uncomfortable, which made her uncomfortable. She wanted to get back to her old, sweet, loveable self.

They both sent emails to Millmore demanding more than just, "Making Progress."

All day, Carl and Sunni did everything they could to avoid each other. They refused to even look in the other's direction. Carl spent time between classes and at lunch chatting with his new friends. Sunni spent the time grunting with the guys.

The one time they'd been forced to pass each other in the hall, the flow of students making dodging each other impossible, Carl had slit his eyes at Sunni and said, "Jerk."

Sunni, dead eyed, had said, "Brat."

They each huffed and walked on, infuriated that the other was so infuriating.

On Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays they each had weightlifting instead of the usual PE class. It was a testament of sorts, I suppose, to the possibility of progress that girls had been allowed to lift weights, as this was a rather radical notion at one time. But, in order for their female athletes to compete with those at the other schools, modern science dictated they do strength training, and so as ever wanting to be the best, Carrolwood had been forced to acquiesce.

With the advent of co-ed classes, the weight room had become a steamy swamp of sexual tension. With the boys on one side, grunting, heaving massive weights, slamming them down, the girls could not help but experience a kind of primal attraction. The boys, meanwhile, discovered much the same. To the surprise of many a boy, the sight of a female loading a bar of impressive weight, lifting it, and throwing it over her head, was quite alluring. So, long, of course, the weight being lifted was sufficiently less than what they, themselves, could lift.

Strong, indeed, was the new sexy. Just not too strong.

Carl had always loved lifting. He was one of the strongest of the young men, and he enjoyed catching the females glancing over appreciatively at his muscled frame. Today, however, he felt much differently as he stuck his glossy head into the weight room, peaking around nervously. He'd struggled to settle on an outfit. On the one hand, he felt he would be too exposed laying back, legs spread, on the bench to do bench presses if he wore only the little short shorts.



On the other, the leggings were— scandalous. His ass looked too good, and he did not want that sight to get burned into the brains of his classmates. He finally settled on both, pulling the lime green short shorts on over a pair of black yoga pants. He looked in the mirror, turning this way and that. His ass still looked far too sexy, but at least it would be obvious to everyone he was trying to be modest. He hoped? He'd slipped on a flouncy, open sleeved tank top with a plunging neckline.

He spotted Sunni, doing curls, talking to Matt. Hmpf. He thought, amused at the little weight Sunni was using. And what was the deal with her and Matt?

"Carli!" Kennedy called. "Come on! We're about to start!"

Damn. Carl cursed inwardly. He had wanted to sneak in unnoticed, if that was even possible the way he looked now. Kennedy's shout had made everyone aware of him, so he plastered a huge smile on his face and putting as much confidence as he could into his strut, sashayed into the gym, ponytail swaying.

The guys did most of their work solo. They sometimes shared a bench of a squat rack, but they did their own thing. Kennedy and the Lady Hawks liked to do group work outs, and she'd set up stations for them to as a circuit. Today was bench, squats, jump squats, split squats, then jump rope. They would do it three times. After hugs and air kisses, Carl looked at the weight loaded on the bench and said, "I'm gonna need more weight than that? I can, like, lift so much more."

"Oh? Like this?" Kennedy said, stepping aside so he could see the bench behind her had 225 pounds on the bar.

"Omigod," Carl said.

“I used to watch you sometimes. I mean, just to study your form.”

“Yeah, right,” Carl said. It was good to hear a girl talk about him as he’d been.

The girls warmed up together, Kennedy taking the lead. Then, the circuit started. Carl made it through the first round, but he was surprised at how gassed he felt as he jumped rope— getting it caught up in his feet more than a few times. Of course, this brought some teasing comments from the girls. “You jump like a boy! Come on, Carli! Keep up!”

Carl took it all in stride, giggling at himself, rolling his eyes, shrugging. It was all part of being one of the girls. The change came — and surely you saw this coming— during the second circuit, when Carl lay back for the bench press. Now, I must point out, Carl could lift much more than 225 pounds. The weight of 225 was chosen as a weight he could lift many times, straining just at the end of the set. So, he lifted the weight with great confidence, knowing that he could easily push it back up once he brought it down to his chest.

It should also be noted that as Carl positioned himself and lifted the weight, Sunni watched, experiencing a flash of jealousy mixed with attraction as she drank in his strength and those gorgeous legs. Kennedy stood at the head of the bench, ready to spot Carl should he need help toward the end of the set, but she was distracted, as she knew he could easily lift this weight.

Carl lifted the bar, started to bring it down to his chest. Just then, the bar seemed to double or even triple in weight. Carl felt as if he were shrinking, getting smaller on the bench. His eyes went wide as the bar sank to his chest and began crushing his ribs. He made a squeaking noise, then gasped, “help!”

Kennedy grabbed the bar with both hands, but though she relieved some of the pressure crushing Carl's ribs, she could not pull it up and off him. "Someone!" She said. "It's too heavy."

"Unh! Help!" Carl squealed. He planted his feet on the floor and arched his back, trying to get more power, to push, but the bar wouldn't move. He felt powerless! He was on his back, staring up at Kennedy, whose face had gone red with strain as she struggled to help him. "Help!" Carl said again, feeling trapped, feeling like the weight would crush him, his heart racing as he began to panic.

Which is when a mighty beard came into view. Two big, strong hands grabbed the bar. Kennedy let go and stepped aside. Carl found himself staring up into Sunni's face as his heart sank. *No. Not her*, he thought, even in his struggles. *Why does it have to be her?*

Sunni effortlessly pulled the bar from Carl's hands, settled it safely onto the rack. There was a small cheer—guys and girls—and Sunni raised a fist. Carl rolled off the bench, face flush from the exertion, and—found himself looking at Sunni's chest, which was not her pleasantly inviting chest of moments before, but a hard, Superman chest, all muscle. He tilted his head back, shocked to realize he'd shrunk. Both of their outfits had morphed to match their new mass.

Sunni looked down, smiled a half smile, clearly pleased at the new, bite sized Carl. "You okay. Shorty?"

"Shorty?" Carl fumed. "I totally had that."

"With those little arms? Yeah, right."

"Little?" Carl glanced in the mirror. His bulging biceps were gone. Pretty little arms, soft and round, as round as his narrow

shoulders. “Oh.... No.” He glanced at Sunni’s arms. Mighty Pythons rigged with vein and muscle, bulging shoulders. The sight made Carl tingle. He struggled against an urge to touch that bicep, to squeeze and see how hard it was...

He put his hands against Sunni’s rock-hard pecs instead and pushed. “Jerk!”

Sunni let herself be pushed backward, chuckling. “You’re welcome.” She walked back over to the other side where the guys were watching, smirking, amused but also impressed by her rocking new body.

“Okay! Let’s get back to it!” Kennedy said, clapping drawing the attention away from Carl, who she could see was in agony. Carl, relieved to get back to thinking about something other than his new shame, went to the back-squat station, this time the one that had been set up for the other girls, and started to work. Throughout the rest of class, Carl and Sunni took turns glaring at each other.

The other kids all entertained a variation of the same thought when it came to Carli and Sunni: Get a room already.

Sunni’s Mom did a double take as she drove up, seeing the hulking figure of her daughter, now bulging with muscle. She may not even have recognized Sunni but for the fact that she was the only students at Carrolwood with such a studly beard. Sunni, still not used to her new size, bumped her head as she folded up her frame to fit into the front seat. It now felt even more of an improper fit for her with her new muscle mass, and she yanked the seatbelt across

her chest, careful not to trap her beard, thoroughly annoyed at how small and cramped the car now felt to her.

“Your muscles are so big!” Mom gushed. “You must be able to lift a house!”

“I am not happy about it,” Sunni said, making a fist, watching the veins lacing around her bicep move.

Mom put the car in gear. ‘Oh, I don’t know that it’s so bad.’

“I’m a girl! I’m supposed to be petite and cute and how am I ever supposed to get a boyfriend now?”

“You don’t have to shout at me,” Mom said.

“I’m not— I don’t— I don’t know what to do. This is all so-weird.”

“I know what to do,” Mom said, as she turned onto the expressway instead of heading back to their house.

“Where are we going?” Sunni, as always, had a lot of studying to do.

“Well, we’re heading South on the Parkway. So....”

“Somewhere South?”

“Haha. Wait. You don’t remember.”

“Remember?”

“Um, happy birthday!”

“It’s not my...”. Sunni concentrated, remembered. “Oh! Wow. I can’t believe I forgot,” she said. “I can finally vote!”

“Oh, my little... er, girl is officially an adult.”

“And we’re going to Tiresian Gardens!”

“Just like every year.”

Sunni peddled her feet against the floor and clapped her hands. “Oh. This is so great. Thanks, Mom.”

“Well, this may be the last time,” Mom said, getting a little teary.  
“With you going off to college next year.”

“I’ll find a way to come home.”

“Oh, you’ll have all new friends then, and you’ll want to celebrate with them.”

“Mom...”

“It’s all just a part of life. You’ve got to spread your wings, fly away and leave the empty nest...”

Sunni leaned over and kissed her mom on the cheek. “I love you, Mom.”

Mom smiled, putting a hand to her cheek where Sunni had kissed her.

“Let’s forget all about that and just have fun!” Sunni said.

“Let’s.”

The village of Lady Mills, NJ had been established in 1687, and the downtown remained largely as it always had been: a shady green cluster of pre-colonial houses, simple churches and iron fences. Turn down Old Mill Road, and after passing over a covered bridge that spanned the calm, enchanting waters of the Tiresian River, you will find yourself in a charming little glen in which sits a sprawling Victorian Home all ginger bread and pretty towers, widows walks and weeping willows, which once housed the prosperous Throckmorton Clan, and which in 1957 had been converted into the now legendary Tiresian Gardens Tea Room

The current owner, Jenny Aiello, who referred to herself as the caretaker, was, indeed, the granddaughter of the original founders, and ran the tea house now with her son, Angel. Her grandparents had restored the home, which had fallen into some disrepair over the

centuries, to its original glory and furnished the tea rooms with antiques from the 1600s, hung the windows with lace curtains and had even had such details as the table clothes and napkins made from materials and dyed in colors one would find in the era from which the house emerged.

To walk into Tiresian Gardens was to feel oneself swept into the past, back to a slower, more genteel time when people considered a taking an hour for tea and pleasant conversation not merely a diversion, but an absolute necessity in the preservation of one's sense of self as a civilized human being. The desire to maintain this rarified atmosphere was so great among the staff and customers, in fact, that one was required to check all cellphones upon entry, lest the barbaric chiming of said infernal invention should jar everyone in the room and spoil their special time together.

As always this time of year, the forest that surrounded the Tea Room had begun to flare with the glorious colors of fall, the bright leaves reflected in the waters of the river. Sunni's heart fluttered as she and her mother entered, checking their phones, greeting the smiling face of Jenny, who as always was bustling about the place, as ever a vision of contentment, as ever perfectly at home as the proprietor of a place referred to most often as "magical" by all so blessed as to pass through its doorway.

Sunni and her mother had been coming here on her birthday since as long as she could remember, and she had fond memories of when she was little, putting on her special dress and long white gloves. That had ended when she'd turned 13 and decided she was too sophisticated to play dress up but thinking back on those days still brought a smile to her face. "Right this way," Angel said, leading

them to a table in the back, next to a window that overlooked the gardens.

“Our table!” Sunni said, pleased and delighted that it all looked the same. It is a comfort, indeed, in the ever-changing modern world, to find a place such as this, where time itself seems frozen. It does give us some sense, does it not, of the possibility of immortality, the notion that some things live on?

“Our table!” Mom agreed with a sigh.

They prepared to sit. Angel swiftly removed the delicate little antique chair from Sunni’s side. “One moment,” he said. “Please.” He pulled the chair away, grabbing a large, heavy, oaken chair and pushing it over instead. “For your comfort.”

Sunni smiled, but felt suddenly self-conscious about her giant size. It shook her out of her nostalgic haze. “I must look ridiculous,” she mumbled as she sat, placing the cloth napkin in her lap.

“You look handsome,” Mom said. “Now, no fussing. We are here to have fun on your special day.”

It is a testament to the wonderful power of the Gardens that Sunni did, indeed, manage to get lost once again in the location’s sweet nostalgic embrace. Soon, she and her mother were laughing, reminiscing, re-sharing their treasured memories, sipping their favorite teas and nibbling on the exquisite cakes. The sun descended, bathing the gardens in the soft golden light seen only in the fall, when the curve of the earth perfectly shapes those rays into a diffuse aura that paints the end of the summer in golden elegance.

As they left the Gardens at the end of that joyous time, it struck Sunni that her mother may be right. Next year, she would be off to college, and this *could be* the very last time the two of them would



share this special time. A tear rolled down her cheek, a sob escaped her manly chest.

Mom put a hand on her back and said, “Oh” but she, too, had been overcome by the same thoughts, and the two of them climbed into the car, dabbing at their tears, and paused to look once more upon the sight of Tiresian Gardens, wondering if they would ever be here like this, together, again.

The drive home was spent mostly in silence. Mom’s mind swam with memories— Sunni’s first steps, her first dance recital, the time she’d lost her two front teeth and had had the most adorable, gapped tooth smile. Sunni had turned her attention to her phone and what was NOT there: a single message from any of her friends wishing her a happy birthday. Could they all have forgotten? She’d forgotten, herself, she reasoned, so maybe? But, even Kennedy? She seethed at the thought, thinking of Kennedy and Carli, hanging out, talking about RBG, soccer. She started to send Kennedy an angry text. “U call yourself a friend...” Stopped herself. Deleted. Started again. ‘I guess we’re not friends anymore...’

“What is it?” Mom said, noticing Sunni’s pre-occupation with her phone, the stormy look growing on her face.

“Nothing,” Sunni mumbled.

“You seem upset.”

“It’s just—” Sunni glanced over and saw a grin on Mom’s face.

“What?” Mom laughed.

“Why are you laughing?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“No. You do. What’s funny?” Sunni could feel her anger building. Was even her mother turning against her?

“Look,” Mom said as the car turned the corner and headed toward the house.

“What—?” Sunni froze. There gathered on their front lawn and driveway— all the kids from school! “Mom!”

“Surprise!” All the kids yelled as Sunni and Mom pulled up at the curb.

Sunni jumped from the car, bumping her head, and ran to the kids, grabbing Kennedy and lifting her off her feet in a massive bear hug. “You remembered!” She roared as she set Kennedy back down.

“Like I would forget my bestie’s birthday,” Kennedy said.

“What’s this?” Mom said, tugging on Sunni’s elbow, drawing her attention to the big, black Cadillac Escalade in the driveway.

The kids, who’d been partially blocking it, moved aside to reveal Dad, holding a fob. “Happy Birthday!” He said.

“What? NO!” Sunni said.

“You’re going to be off to college and you need your own car.”

Sunni ran to the car, running her hand along the smooth, shiny black surface. “Its... its....”

“Too big,” Dad said. “Too aggressive. I told— “

“Perfect!” Sunni said, grabbing her dad in another of her now crushing bear hugs, lifting him off his feet. “I love it!”

Dad hid his irritation behind an agonized grin that would have made The Joker jealous.



## CHAPTER 15

Carl lay on his bed, phone in hand. “Like I care,” he said as he scrolled through the steady stream of pictures and videos popping up all over social media— #sunni18bdays— smiling happy people, hugging and mugging for the camera. “So overrated,” he fumed. He put his phone down. Huffed. Picked it back to see more photos. More videos. Was, like, everyone there? He put his phone back down and buried his head in his pillow, stifling a scream. Sunni’s Mom had, actually, invited him. Kennedy had begged him to come.

As if.

Sunni. Ha!

While she was busy having her party on a school night, he would study. He grabbed his smarts. Read. A little. Picked up his phone. Surely, the party had wound down? NO! Ugh!

A knock on the door. Carl’s heart fluttered. Dan had been merciless when he’d seen his “Big” brother, all slender and petite. Carl was shorter than Dan now and certainly weaker. Dan had smirked down at him and made a point to bush against him as he passed, easily knocking Carl aside. Carl, thinking of all the times he’d twisted Dan’s arm, wrestled him down, was full of that anxiety again that had been consuming him since his changes started. He was sure payback was coming, and he knew there wasn’t much he could do about it. Sitting up, he looked at his skinny little arms and felt sick. Well, he would do his worst. That was for sure.

“Yes?”

The door creaked open.

“Dad?”

“Hey, kid,” Dad said. “Got a minute?”

“Yeah?” Carl said, pushing his hair back over his shoulders.

Tired of always wearing skirts, he’d finally relented and put on a pair of jeans, but he still kept his knees together as he sat on the edge of his bed. “Am I in trouble?”

“No,” Dad said as he grabbed Carl’s desk chair and pulled it over to the bed, his eyes briefly falling on the hair and makeup accessories scattered across Carl’s desk. “Wow. We really need to talk more often,” Dad said, saddened to realize that most of the time when they did talk these days it was some form of “trouble.”

Carl felt strange sitting there in his feminine form, with his long hair and soft voice. It was always a little awkward talking to his parents anymore, but this all seemed so— wrong. “What’s up?” He said, seeing Dad struggling to find words.

“Well,” Dad said. “This is— let me just say it.”

Carl waited, though he did begin to idly twist one of his bracelets around his wrist.

“This. All these changes. I just want you to know that I have always been proud of you, and nothing will ever change that.”

Carl felt misty. Fought against the tears he felt building up inside him. “Daddy,” he said, almost choking on the word. “Dad. Sorry. This thing—?”

“I know. And you don’t need to apologize. Ever. I’m here for you. I got your back.”

Carl looked away. “The other night? Family night?”

“I know,” Dad said. “It was— your mother is having a very hard time with this.”

Carl nodded. He didn't know what to say. The tension was growing. He kind of wanted it to be over. "Well, thanks."

"How about we play catch tomorrow?"

"Really?"

"Yeah. Of course. Like old times."

"I'd like that," Carl said, now straining against the sudden urge to give Dad a hug. "Yeah. Catch."

"It's a date—" Dad said. "I mean, we'll..."

*Okay. This is getting weird,* Carl thought. "After school," Carl said. "Catch."

"Right."

They both sighed with relief. Dad started to get up. Stopped. "One more thing."

Something about his tone filled Carl with dread.

"I talked to your brother. I told him—you know. Things are different now. As long as you— your condition."

"Dad!"

"He's a lot bigger and stronger, and he needs to realize that."

"I can take care of myself!"

"I know. I know. Well, anyway, catch tomorrow."

"Yuppers."

Dad left. Carl raised an eyebrow even as he felt himself dying with shame at the idea that Dan and Dad had had a talk. About him. He knew what was unsaid. Carl was "a girl" now and had to be treated differently. It made him so mad! Dan would never let him live this down!

And yet, why was he also—he didn't know— kinda a little emotional over the fact that his Dad was being— protective?

Once more, Carl buried his face in his pillow and screamed.





## CHAPTER 16

Though Sunni had thoroughly enjoyed her birthday and was loving her big, powerful new SUV, she drove to school eager to find Millmore and see if they could finally put an end to this unwanted adventure. True, she fully intended to use this experience to write an essay detailing the insights she's gained into gender and power so there was a silver lining, but Sunni very much wanted to get back to being Sunni.

Carl, glancing in the rearview mirror to check his makeup as he pulled into the school parking lot, felt very much the same. He did not want to spend his senior year as one of the girls, and though he was quite certain that his time hanging out with the girls had been most informative, he was also very certain he preferred to be a young man. He parked his car, only to have a big, black SUV pull into the spot next to his. Carl sighed. His plan to avoid Sunni at all costs was already a failure. He climbed out of his car, tossing his hair as Sunni jumped out of hers.

"Um, happy birthday," he said, unable to stop himself from tilting his head back and offering her a pretty smile.

"Thanks," Sunni said. "It was tight." She couldn't help but notice how pretty Carl looked. It just popped out. "You look cute."

"Thanks," Carl said with a giggle, hooking his hair behind his ear. He couldn't help himself. But, he then focused and made himself get serious. "Millmore," he said.

"Millmore."

They had a little time before homeroom, so they stalked the halls hunting for their supposed savior. Really, they couldn't help but

wonder what was taking him so long. What kind of genius was he, anyway? They were losing hope, when they both stopped short, seeing a new girl in a little circle of girls who looked very familiar.

“Is that Betty? From Riverdale?” Carl asked.

“It looks like her,” Sunni said. “But she’s actually 25 or something.”

“What would she....?”

“Oh, no,” they said in unison.

They marched up to her. Sunni took her by the elbow. “Bye, guys!” She called out to the girls she’d been talking to as Sunni pulled her away.

“Omigod,” she said to Carl as they found a quiet corner. “I love your hair!” She reached out to touch it, and Carl slapped her hand away.

“Millmore?” He said, looking in her eyes, trying to spot the dork within.

“Yeah,” she said with a little shoulder shrug. “But it’s Dorothy now.”

“What the hell?” Sunni barked.

“Oh, you know. I found the perps, and they made me a better offer. I mean?” She gestured down at her body. “And, I’m popular!”

“You sold us out!” Sunni said.

“Don’t yell at me!”

“Dorothy,” Carl said, adopting a soft, girl to girl tone. “It’s okay. You look super pretty.”

“Thanks.” A little eye roll.

“Just tell us who. That’s all. Who?”

Millmore made the lips are sealed and throw away the key gesture. "Can't. Want to stay like this."

The bell rang.

"Tell us!" Sunni roared.

"Buh-bye!" Millmore said, sashaying away down the hall.

"Women!" Sunni spat.

"Hey!" Carl said.

They looked at each other. Slit eyes. Turned and stormed off in opposite directions. After a few steps, they each realized they were heading the wrong direction for their homerooms. They turned and sheepishly headed past each other.

"Airhead," Sunni whispered.

"Caveman!" Carl hissed.

Neither could resist the urge to glance back at the other as they passed, and they were each mortified to be caught in the act.

Carl went to class, but he had trouble concentrating. He plucked at his hair, looking at the way the light shone of its golden surface, contemplating the possibility he would have to spend the rest of his life as a girl. It was not merely Millmore's metamorphosis into Lili Reinhart's twin, but the larger implications, which had heretofore escaped Carl's consideration.

The villain had the ability to alter reality. Even if he and Sunni closed in on their tormentor, what was to stop their mutual enemy from merely cutting out that knowledge and splicing memories from a world where they did NOT close in? Their attacker had the ability to change things to suit them, even to the point of making Carl talk like a girl. Maybe even in this universe he and Sunni had figured out

who'd done it, and the culprit had merely erased that knowledge from their memories?

Indeed, as per the multi-worlds theory, there was a universe where they did catch their attacker, one where they didn't, one where their attacker just changed them back at some point, one where they married and had babies together...

*What? Gross. Why did I even think that?* Carl wondered. Sunni. She would be a terrible husband, he was sure, and besides, she was too— big. If he ever did date a boy, which, AS IF— it would be someone more suited to his size, Carl felt. They would need to be able to take cute pictures together.

And, enough of that, Carl decided.

The teacher asked Carl a question. He'd barely been paying attention, but answered anyway, quoting the textbook, and then absently explaining why he felt the answer in the textbook was outdated. The bell rang. Carl slung his backpack over his shoulder and wandered out into the hall, smiling and greeting all his new friends. *This is it*, he decided. There's really no way around it. I'm Carli now, and I will be for the rest of my life.

He found himself wondering when he would get his boobs. It was embarrassing to be flat chested at his age. Some of the chubbier boys had bigger boobs than he did, and much to his surprise and chagrin, he began to think about wearing a bra and stuffing the cups with toilet paper so at least he'd have SOMETHING.

Carl opened his locker and was just primping his hair when the door slammed shut. Carl turned. "Matt?"

"Hey, Carli."

Matt put his arms against the lockers, caging Carl between them, then leaned in, their bodies close. Carl felt his space being invaded, and immediately his heart began to race, but he didn't want to seem scared, so he tilted his face back and said, "You want something?"

Matt had a hard look in his eyes, and he moved a strand of hair away from Carl's cheek, letting his fingertips just brush the soft skin. "Yeah. I wanted to tell you that you look so fucking hot."

Carl giggled, despite himself, from nervousness and not because he liked the comment. In fact, everything Matt was doing made him feel- gross. Even Matt's tone sounded to Carl like the tone of voice you might use when talking to a pet. "Okay!" Carl said, trying to duck under Matt's arm. "Bye!"

Matt moved, putting his leg against the locker to block Carl from escaping. "We should hang out," Matt said, moving closer.

Carl felt Matt's hot breath against his neck. "Um, I need to get to class, so...?"

Matt ran his finger along Carl's ear, grabbed his earring and tugged. "Let's meet after school."

"Um.... " Carl felt so small and scared. He didn't know what to do. No one had ever acted like this toward him before, and his mind raced with shame and confusion.

"Bro!" Sunni shouted, barging into the scene. She held out her fist. "Bump it out."

Matt looked at her, furious. The warning bell rang. Matt bumped Sunni back, which forced him to move one of his caging arms away from Carl. Sunni wedged herself between Matt and Carl, putting a protective arm over Carl's shoulder and moving him away from Matt. "I need to borrow Carli for a minute," she said. "Theater stuff."

“Yeah. Good,” Matt said. “Catchya later.”

“Later,”

Carl felt himself overwhelmed with emotions. He still felt gross and helpless from the way Matt treated him, while at the same time his body flooded with feminine gratitude to Sunni, who’d saved him, protected him. The feelings scared poor Carl, and he twisted from under Sunni’s arm and marched off to class without looking back.

Sunni watched, enjoying the sight of his skirt swishing, his long legs. She felt all kinds of confusion as well. When she’d first seen Matt getting so aggressive and pushy with Carl, she’d smiled, loving the idea of seeing Carl all meek and yielding. *He deserves it*, she’d thought. *Let him see what girls have to put up with all the time!* But then, when he’d turned to try and escape, she’d seen a look in his eyes— something— and she’d felt an overpowering need to— save him. It had just become something that she HAD to do, and she had, and it had made her feel like she’d grown to 10 feet tall and become bulletproof.

Sunni had seen the dated, sexist essays suggesting female had a genetic predisposition to find strong, protective men attractive. It was all part of seeking a mate who would care for and protect them while they were pregnant and vulnerable. Sunni had always rejected such retrograde thinking as more patriarchal nonsense trying to enforce the male= strong, female = weak paradigm. Now, however, she was having a hard time denying that she, at least, had totally loved the feeling she got from protecting a helpless female. Whether it applied more generally, she would not say, but it applied to her.

All day long, Carl found himself thinking about how scared he’d been when Matt cornered him, and how— fluttery?— he didn’t even

know the word to use, it had made him feel when Sunni had rescued him. The whole thing bothered him on so many levels. For one, he was a guy, so he wasn't supposed to— love— having someone protect him. For another, in the 21st Century even the girls in movies and on TV shows didn't play the damsel in distress anymore. Rey didn't need protection. She was badass. Ugh! Carl was horrified to think that not only was he becoming a girl, but some kind of old-fashioned damsel in distress type. Would he start having fainting spells?

Of course, and I intrude as narrator here more fully, Carl was not ready to confront one of the biggest reasons that his new personality so bothered him. Surely, as he was aware, merely finding himself becoming a bit feminine and submissive was reason enough, but deeper still was the reality that he was becoming the exact kind of girl he often fantasized about— one who wanted to be commanded, controlled, led. It was a fantasy he harbored and never wished to become.

Nevertheless, Carl worked through his tangled emotions, and especially struggling with one particular question that seemed to disturb him now as much as the experience: should he thank Sunni for what she'd done? Naturally, he turned to his bestie for advice, explaining the whole incident to Kennedy.

Kennedy listened, loving every detail. Without hesitation, she said, "Yes. I mean, you really do need to thank him. The good ones are so rare." In fact, Kennedy very desperately wanted Carli and Sunni to get together. She felt they were perfect for each other. And, she suspected that the thank you might lead to something more.

“Really?” Carl said. “I mean, I totally felt it was the polite thing to do, but I didn’t ask her to come along and butt in.”

“Thank him,” Kennedy said, using the male pronoun. “You guys have to be together in this play. It’ll keep things civil.”

“Kay,” Carl said, throwing his arms around Kennedy. “Thanks!”





## CHAPTER 17

Carl arrived at theater practice early, spotting Sunni on stage, surrounded by some of the girls from the cast, all staring up at her as she seemed to be expounding on stage fighting. He took a deep breath, meaning to march right up to her and get the apology over with, but then Mrs. Calloway suddenly came swooping across his path, running up to him. “Carli!” She said, breathless. “We’ve lost our Mabel!”

“Omigod,” Carl said. “Is she okay?”

“Mono,” Calloway said. “She’ll be fine. But, and I know this is a huge ask, will you step in and play Mabel? You’re the only girl with the voice.”

“Mabel?” Carl said. Mabel was the female romantic lead. “Um, well, —“

‘I know this will really challenge your ....’

*Sense of identity?* Carl thought.

“...acting skills, but I know you can do it. I know you can!”

“I’m so flattered, but the whole non-traditional casting thing ...”

“I need you, Carli Bright. We all do!” Calloway gestured toward the stage. The whole cast was looking out at Carl, their faces full of hope. Carl could not say no to such a desperate group. It would have been rude.

“Fine,” Carl said to the rousing cheers of the whole cast. Since it seemed he was doomed to girlhood anyway, he might as well just leap in with both feet and let the whole school see him as a female in love.

Teacher threw her arms around him and crushed him in a mighty hug. "Yes! Yes! The show must go on! Wait until you see your costume! It's so pretty!!!"

Costume? Carl groaned. He hadn't thought about that part. Mabel, like all the other girls, would be wearing a Victorian dress. So, one more thing he vowed never to do went down the drain.

Of course, yet another surprise remained. The boy playing Frederick had also caught mono, so the male romantic lead would be played, of course, by none other than Sunni. "Don't worry," Sunni said as they took their positions to rehearse one of the scenes. "I'll make it easy for you to fall in love with me."

"As if," Carl said, rolling his eyes as the music started to play. Of course, they were set to rehearse one of Frederick's numbers, and of course, it was Oh, Is There Not One Maiden's Breast. Both Carl and Sunni had the scores in hand and read from the sheet music, as they had only now been named to their parts. Sunni's deep voice boomed across the auditorium, she showing incredible range by sliding up from her baritone to a youthful sounding tenor:

Sunni  
Oh, -is there not one maiden breast  
Which does not feel the moral beauty  
Of making worldly interest  
Subordinate to sense of duty?  
Who would not give up willingly  
All matrimonial ambition,  
To rescue such a one as I  
From his unfortunate position?

Carl once more felt his newly developed sense of shame at his flat chest. But, stifling his embarrassment, he took a deep breath to give

himself lots of air and sang. His sweet, pretty voice joined the delightful feminine chiming of the other girls:

CARLI and GIRLS

Alas! there's not one maiden breast  
Which seems to feel the moral beauty  
Of making worldly interest  
Subordinate to sense of duty!

When the song ended, TEACHER applauded. "Amazing! Oh, Sunni! You are so manly and rugged. The audience will go wild! And Carl- you ARE Mabel! Just the absolute embodiment of a young lady! Everyone. So good! Moving on!"

When practice ended, Carl asked Sunni if they could talk outside. She agreed, and so they found themselves under a willow tree. The day had turned cold and cloudy, and a frigid north wind blew down on them. Carl, his slender new frame far less tolerant of cold, shivered. Sunni took off her jacket and slipped it over his shoulders. Carl offered her a grateful smile. Given how confused he was feeling about finding himself in the feminine role in life and on stage, he almost refused. But, well, he was cold, and the jacket was warm, so what was a boy to do?

"You were great today," Sunni said. "And I'm not saying that to try and give you a hard time."

"Thanks," Carl said, pleased at the compliment. "I thought you nailed Frederick."

"Yeah," Sunni agreed. "You wanted to talk?"

"I did. Um, just, well, earlier today? With Matt?"

"Yeah."

Carl hooked his hair behind his ear. He found himself standing with his feet on top of each other, and he was turning one nervously. “Thanks. I just wanted to say thanks?”

Sunni stared down at Carl’s face. She had never seen such a pretty face in her life. With the cold breeze his cheeks and even the bridge of his nose had turned pink. His mouth was slightly open. He had a tiny little bit of an overbite, so he had that cute little bunny look, with his top teeth just visible. Sunni impulsively cupped Carl’s chin, running her thumb across his soft skin.

He didn’t stop her, but his breath seemed to quicken.

“When I saw what Matt was doing, I got so mad,” Sunni said, moving closer.

“Really?” Carl said, not retreating, letting Carli tilt his head further back, a little thrill passing through him as she made all the moves, guided him. *Is she going to kiss me?* He wondered, shocked, scared and... excited by the idea.

“I— just had to protect you.” Sunni said.

The words, the gruff tone of voice, it made Carl shudder. He closed his eyes, found himself touching Sunni’s bicep, squeezing.

And then they were kissing, Sunni having swooped in and covered Carl’s mouth with her own, beard tickling his soft face. The shock of the kiss curled Carl’s toes, and he tried to push away he was so scared at what he was feeling, but Sunni slipped her arm around his waist and pulled him in, kissing, kissing... and Carl couldn’t help himself— he kissed back... his whole body tingling... he felt so small and yet so safe in her arms....

And he felt his chest swelling, rounding, soft round breasts forming and pressing against Sunni’s rock-hard body, and he made

soft, feminine moan as a whole range of new and impossible pleasures ran through his little body.... Sunni slipped her tongue between his lips, and made a deep, masculine grunt, and once more the sound of that deep voice sent tremors of ecstasy through Carl, his brain snapping and popping as a whole new world opened up to...

“NO PDAs!”

Carl and Sunni shouted with fright and jumped away from each other. Dr. Ben stood some feet away, looking at them with a bemused smile on his face. “Move along!”

Carl and Sunni, embarrassed to have been caught, started to walk off together, Sunni instinctively grabbing Carl’s little hand. Dr. Ben cleared his throat. “Separate.”

“We’re going to the parking lot?” Carl said.

“We’re headed the same way,” Sunni agreed. “So?”

“Miss Bright. You will proceed through the building. Mr. Lee, on your way.”

Carl did as he was told, waving sheepishly goodbye to Sunni, even as he now looked down to contemplate the new breasts swelling out the top of his blouse. As he passed, Mr. Ben stopped him. “Miss Bright. I know this is all new to you. Be careful of boys. They may try and take advantage.”

*Perv!* Carl thought, but he was feeling so super embarrassed he just kept his eyes down and said, “Okay. Yes.”

“Dismissed.”

Carl scampered off, trying to figure out how to stop himself from blushing and tingling and— *omigod! Sunni kissed me!*

Carl's hear whirled. He felt hyper-conscious of the new weight on his chest, as well as the feeling of straps over his shoulders and across his back. He realized he was now wearing a bra, which only added to his feeling of embarrassment, as boys most certainly did not wear bras. He couldn't help but duck into the bathroom, hurrying to the mirror, turning side to side, drinking in the sight of his new, shapely profile. I have related, dear reader, the fact that Carl had found himself feeling ashamed of his flat chest, that part of him had begun to long, just as any young girl does, for the time he would get his boobs. That part of Carl, seeing the impressive bust that now graced his slender frame, rejoiced.

Yet, Carl still retained some of his former masculinity. And that part of him looked upon his new assets, and the bra that held them, with horror. They were large. Larger than most girls his age. The size of cantaloupes. Good sized cantaloupes. Looking at himself with that maidenly bust, with the narrow waist and the way his hips rounded out his skirt, he felt some of the old male stirrings he'd felt when looking at girls, and he turned away from the mirror, terrified and unnerved at his inviting new shape, hurrying from the school, diving into his car and racing home.

As he burst through the front door, slouching self-consciously, Dad, tossing a baseball up and down, greeted him. "Still on for catch?"

"Oh." Part of Carl wanted to take a rain check. But, it had seemed important to Dad, and this was a key chance bond a bit. Besides, Carl had accepted that he was stuck as a girl, and he suspected he was just going to have to get used to his new—assets? "Yeah. Let me change. Be right down."

As he went upstairs to his room, he passed Danny. "Nice jugs," Danny said with a snicker.

"Shut up," Carl hissed back.

Carl sighed as soon as he closed the door. He wiggled out of his skirt, took off his blouse. He had decided he would NOT look at himself. He would just change clothes, go downstairs and that would be that. The bra he found himself wearing was plain white, and it hooked in the back. He'd slipped a few of these off girls over the years, but it was a little different when he had to reach behind himself. Still, after an awkward moment he pinched the hooks and the bra slipped free, sliding down his shoulders and allowing his breasts to sway. Oh. That felt strange. Carl's chest had been hard and flat since he was a child. His chest had never *moved* before. He looked down to see them milky white, round, big, pink nipples that were getting tight in the cool air of his bedroom. The sensation of his nipples floating inches above his chest, tingling, unnerved him, and in spite of himself he stepped in front of the mirror, shocked despite all mental preparation to see those firm, round breasts perched above his taut, soft tummy.

*I'm hot*, he thought, pulling his gaze away from the curvy blonde in the mirror, unable to even process whether being hot was a good or bad thing. *I look like one of those girls who does bikini try on videos*, he thought, and the image of him smiling into the camera wearing a tiny little leopard print bikini flooded his brain. *Omigod. What's wrong with me?*

Carl had, as was now his habit, put a great deal of thought into what outfit to wear while playing catch with his Dad, so he didn't need to worry about that now. He slipped on a pair of black yoga



pants, a skater skirt for modesty, the Ramones T-shirt and a pair of black and white Converse All-Star High tops, plus a Black and White Yankees' cap that echoed the color scheme of his shoes. He took a quick look in the mirror just to— Oh, no. The Ramones top now strained across his breasts, which swayed and bounced with his every move, his hard nipples poking enticingly through the thin fabric. Carl groaned and pulled the t-shirt off, slipping into one of his sports bras, even as he processed the realization that from now on, he would NEED a bra.

Hmmm. The sports bra felt vastly different from the one he'd found himself wearing at school. That one had lifted his chest, the cups literally cupping his puppies. The sports bra compressed them against his ribs, holding them much more firmly in place. He hopped up and down as a test, and there was still a little jiggle, but they were much more secure, and the bra completely hid what was going on with his nipples.

"Carli" Dad called from downstairs. "We're burning sunlight."

"Coming!" Carl called back, his voice sparkling with excitement. He grabbed his glove—it was now a softball mitt—and hurried downstairs, catching the ball Dad tossed to him as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Not in the house!" Mom yelled, eying Carl's latest developments with an envious eye.

"Okay, Okay," Dad and Carl said, heading out to the backyard. Carl, giving his Dad a conspiratorial look, tossed the ball back to him in the kitchen. They laughed together as they headed out the door.

Mom walked to the patio doors. She saw Dad throw the ball high in the air, as if it were a fly ball. Carl got under it, raising his arms to

make the catch, and raising some other parts in a most fetching manner. Mom seethed, thinking about them throwing the ball in the house, laughing like confidants, defying mean old Mom. *Carli is so full of herself*, Mom thought, eying Carl's youthful figure. Mom was, of course, a lovely woman herself, but she was older and had given birth to two babies. It is not my intent to suggest that an older woman and a mother cannot be beautiful, as I have already stated, Mom was most certainly that. But there is a particular kind of beauty found only in the young, male or female, that is lost with time and never to be regained.

Given the pressure our society puts on women to look "forever young" while also celebrating youth to the exclusion of all other stages of life, it can be little surprise that Mom, looking at Carl with his feminine glow and slender, teen-age figure, found herself burning with jealousy. More, we may remember the discussion of the Oedipus Complex, and remind ourselves that just as Sunni's father felt threatened by her, Carl's mother now felt threatened by the blossoming beauty her eldest son had become. She was particularly annoyed by his bosom, which she felt might just be larger than hers.

*Maybe it's time I put little miss blondie in her place*, Mom thought. *Maybe it's time.*

Carl, for his part, was pleased to find he still had a rather good arm. He was smaller and certainly had less upper body strength than he'd had as a boy, but a good throw starts with the legs, and Carl had strong, fine legs. He was still a talented athlete, and as he and Dad threw the ball back and forth, he decided that he would try out for softball come spring.

Dad was doing his best. Psychology texts will relate, and this is outside the Freudian assumptions of the Oedipus complex, that some repressed attraction is common between fathers and daughters. Dad was disturbed by these strange feelings, and after one errant glance at Carl's bust, he took control of his eyes and emotions and focused only on making each catch. His focus cleared; he did have one more surprising thought: It was good to have a daughter. And then for a moment he imagined himself walking Carl down the aisle, Carl beaming in a white dress. The thought so unnerved him that he missed the ball completely. It dropped at his feet, bounced, and rolled.

"You're getting old!" Carl sang out, giggling.

"Yes!" Dad said, squatting down to pick up the ball. "I should have worn my glasses!" He tossed the ball back and pushed the thought of Carl's wedding from his mind.



## CHAPTER 18

And what of Sunni? What had changed in her, you may wonder? Let us take a brief leap back in time, and relive the kiss from Sunni's perspective:

Sunni leaned in and kissed Carl. She felt his sudden surprise, his hands on her chest, pushing. She pulled him closer, kissed him more fully, and felt a surge of passion as he softened, began to kiss back, his feminine yielding pure kerosene to her smolder passions. She felt his chest growing, softer, bigger, and the feeling of his soft breasts pressing against her igniting a frenzy of need, even as she became aware of something— happening— in her pants.

Shocked, she suddenly realized that she had become a boy in every respect. The rush of fear and embarrassment and shock served to prevent her from, let us say, manifesting a scandal which Carl would have felt and which no doubt would have left them each blushing with shame. Just as Sunni had felt her change er, um, “growing” she heard, “No PDAs.”

Sunni, were she thinking more rationally, may well have used the excuse to get away from Carl before she, let us say, raised a flagpole? But, Sunni was not yet experienced in the perils of being a boy, and she was also far from rational: the feeling of Carl's small, soft little body in her arms, the sweet taste of his lips, the maidenly moaning sound he'd made when they'd kissed— these had all driven her into an overwrought state of desire, and she very badly wanted to hold and kiss and whisper sweet nothings to this amazing little Elle she'd discovered.

It was, therefore, fortunate, that Mr. Ben had separated them, for by the time Sunni got the parking lot and climbed into her SUV, she began to discover something all young men learn at some point in their lives— and usually in an embarrassing manner— her “friend” had a mind of its own, and as thoughts of Carl and their kiss flowed through her mind, her “friend” got very excited.

“Get down,” Sunni commanded. “Down.” Her friend did not listen. It felt like it was— pulsing— like some sort of alien. Sunni panicked. She’d thought to just wait for Carl and pick up where they had left off, but with her pants tenting, she could not let him see her. It was— crude. So, she’d started her car and driven off, trying her best to think of something— anything— to distract herself, so her crisis would recede and she would be able to enter her home walking upright and not with her hands over her zipper.

Eventually, she managed to distract herself enough from the thoughts of Carl’s soft body and the strawberry smell of his hair to find some relief, and so she was able to enter her house, say her hellos and make it to her room without an embarrassing display. She threw herself on her bed, sighing with relief, annoyed, confused, fascinated by her new and fully baffling experience with male arousal. She tried to study, but her mind raced back to the kiss, the feeling of Carl’s breasts, the soft sounds he’d made, and her insolent new body part once more stood to attention, straining against her pants.

“Stop! Enough! I have things to do!” Sunni paced— as best she could manage with her bulge. She tried yoga and meditation, but a whole range of new feelings had been awoken, and she did not know how to put a stop to them.

Or, did she? Sunni knew what boys did when they needed—release. She, like Carl, had access to the Internet, and like most kids her age she'd gotten plenty of sex education from websites parents liked to pretend didn't exist.

Should she?

No. She was not ready to even touch it, let alone do— things and have it spray goopy stuff all over her room. Instead, she went back to an old-fashioned, tried and true cure: she took a long, cold shower and thought about baseball.

We may now dash through time until after dinner, after studies, as both Carl and Sunni lie on their backs, in their pajamas, ready for a good night's sleep. Our young heroes find themselves in a similarly agitated state, each one haunted by the kiss. Each of them felt scared, as we so often do when we experience true passion, but it was more than the usual jangly nerves of a pair of young people who thought they hated each other only to discover— they did not. Of course, added to the usual mixture of anxiety and uncertainty was a baffled and terrified reaction to the experience of passion as **the opposite sex**. They each felt things in their bodies they had never felt before and never thought to feel.

In addition, there had been a clear shift in their relationship. Carl had found winsome bliss in the submissive role, with Sunni taking total command. Such feelings made him feel unmanly, and somehow less than. Sunni, meanwhile, finding herself taking the aggressive and traditionally masculine role, found herself rebelling against becoming exactly the kind of guy she'd thought she was opposed to as a modern, free-thinking woman.

Yes. Each longed for the other's touch. The other's warm body.

Carl, twisting his hair around his fingers, made a decision.

Sunni, plucking at her beard, made a decision as well.

They texted each other at the exact same moment, their texts passing in the ether and arriving on each other's phones at precisely the same instant:

*Let's never talk about what happened today.*

*Agreed*, they each texted back, each one unable to keep from smiling as they realized they'd been thinking the same thoughts at the same time. Then, they each groaned in frustration. "I can't be falling for him/her," they thought in unison. "Please! Not that!"



## Chapter 19

The next morning, Carl had to sit down to pee. The last change had come. He was now fully a girl, just as Sunni was fully a boy. They each had come to mostly accept the idea and had just decided they would have to learn to live as the opposite gender. They equally resolved they would just ignore the infernal crushing they were experiencing toward one another as the idea of them being a couple was so horrifying as to force each of them to pretend to puke. Each found themselves the object of desire to the members of the opposite sex. Girls tried to catch Sunni's eye, giggled and flirted with her, batting their lashes. She was polite, but let it be known she wasn't dating. The girls accepted it, but kept giving her little hints that, if she were interested at some point, well, she knew where to look.

Things were harder for Carl. Boys in our culture could be more aggressive, maybe even expected to be, and guys like Matt and others pursued him relentlessly, crowding him, negging him, stalking him online. He felt himself wearing down, thinking about going out with someone just to hold off the other wolves. He wished he could talk to his mother about it, but she had grown cold and cruel, making mocking comments on his outfits, his hair and make-up, reminding him constantly how disappointed she was that her oldest son was a girl. He did have Kennedy, but her advice always came around to telling him he should go out with Sunni, which, of course, was like—never going to happen.

Just as Carl was thinking about going out with Matt, he had a breakthrough with his Mom. It was Thursday. The girls' soccer team was having a bake sale to raise money for their travel expenses—and Carl fumed over the fact that the boys never had to have a bake sale!—so Carl had picked up some brownie mix and set up in the kitchen to bake, completely unnerved by the whole Betty Crockerness of it all.

Dan had made his mocking comments and gone off to play video games.

Carl was mixing the batter when Mom came home unexpectedly early from her kickboxing class. She saw Carl with the mixer, an apron on, rubber spatula in hand as he worked the batter. “Oh, you’re so cute. You’ll make such a good little wifey someday.”

“You know I don’t like this, right?” Carl snapped. “Do you have to make it so much harder?”

Mom stopped. “I’m just teasing—” She lied.

“You’re being an a-hole,” Carl said, wagging the rubber spatula. “You’ve been a total— sorry, not sorry— bitch— ever since I started changing. You want to talk about it, or you want to just keep acting like a child?”

Mom was taken aback. She’d actually started to think the bubbly blonde her son had turned into was incapable of anger. She was—impressed. More, the words stung. She knew how she’d been acting, but she’d been making excuses, telling herself any mother would act the same way to see her son—feminized. And more, she’d been struggling to deal with the fact she’d started to feel jealous of him, which made no sense to her at all. She froze. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything,” Carl said. “Just— don’t. I know you don’t love me anymore. But you don’t have to keep reminding me.”

“I don’t—?” Mom felt sick to hear the words “You don’t love me anymore” come out of Carl’s mouth. “It’s not that I don’t love you...” she said. She met Carl’s eyes. They both started to tear up. “I just don’t know how to show you anymore.”

Carl cried first, the tears pouring down his cheeks. He started to run from the kitchen, but Mom rushed to him, hugging him. “I’m sorry,” she said, as she found herself crying as well. “I’m so sorry.” They held each other, crying, sobbing, speaking no words.

Later.

Dad came home from work, entering the house through the door that led to the garage. He felt his body tense. The old saying “Happy Wife, Happy Life” had proven very true. His wife had been angry and annoyed since Carl had started to change, and it had filled the whole house with tension. She’d been extra pissy with him ever since he’d played catch with Carl, and he almost felt she wanted him to take sides with her against his own son— daughter. Against Carl. And so, he was shocked to see Carl and Mom in the kitchen, shoulder to shoulder, watching something on an iPad and giggling together. The whole house smelled of brownies, and his eyes were drawn to a pair of cooling racks lined with rows of melty chocolate squares.

‘Um, hi,” he said, walking over and reaching toward a brownie, eyes locked on Carl and Mom as he tried to puzzle out what was happening.

Carl playfully slapped his Dad’s hand away. “Those are for the bake sale!” He said.

“Bake sale?”

“The girls’ soccer team has to hold bake sales to pay for their own travel,” Mom said. “Because sexism.”

“Men!” Carl said, giggling.

“What are you watching?” Dad said, sensing this new, secret bond between mother and daughter, and not liking how left out he felt.

“Never you mind,” Mom said, shutting the iPad down. She and Carl exchanged an amused glance. “Girl stuff.”

“Come on. What?” Dad said.

“We were talking about periods,” Carl said, smirking.

“Okay,” Dad said, retreating in horror. “Gonna head upstairs.”

“Stay,” Mom called after him. “We’d love to hear your thoughts on menstruation.”

Dad just waved and hurried out, trailed by the girls’ laughter.



## CHAPTER 20

The week of the big homecoming game was fast approaching. Which, of course, also meant the big homecoming dance. The spirit team had festooned the halls with all manner of decorations. There had been a contest for each homeroom to decorate their doors to show who had the most spirit. As a girl, Carl was expected to be front and center when it came to decorating, and he seethed slightly as he and the other girls worked on their door while the boys sat around talking. Sunni, of course, watched jealously as the girls did their thing, sitting with the other males and grunting her way through conversations, the whole time wondering why boys couldn't have fun with glue and glitter.

They each planned to attend the dance stag. Though more than a few girls had been batting their eyes at Sunni, she felt- odd—asking one of what she still thought of as “another girl” to the dance. Carl, meanwhile, had found himself bombarded with guys asking him to go with them. He politely declined, feeling guilty each time a forlorn boy walked away, slump shouldered, his act of courage thwarted. As the date of the dance approached, sensing Sunni and Carl as unreachable, boys and girls had paired off, no one wanting to be one of those poor kids who came to the dance alone. Much to Carl's horror and relief, Matt had eventually asked Kennedy, who'd agreed. It was a relief in that Matt no longer pestered Carl relentlessly to be his date. Horror because Matt kept looking at him with THAT look, and he had made a point of letting Carl know that they WOULD dance together at some point.

“I don’t want you to be a wallflower,” Matt said, framing his lusting ways as a chivalric gesture.

“Oh. I’m sure I’ll be fine.”

“You are fine,” Matt said as Carl batted away his roving hands. “Just be ready. I’ll come get you when the right song comes on.”

In addition to the fact Carl had no desire to have Matt pawing him during a slow dance, he also worried what it could do to his friendship with Kennedy if she saw he and Matt dancing together and realized Matt totally had the hots for Carl. He didn’t want her to be hurt. He considered telling her about Matt— warning her, really- but he’d talked to his Mom and she’d warned him not to. Kennedy was so happy to be going with Matt, and Carl would just have to dodge the drooling boy’s advances so his friend could have her night.

A patina of gloom settled over the week for both Sunni and Carl. It was their senior year, and they had each imagined a big, fun homecoming dance with a special someone, pictures and memories that would last a lifetime. Instead, they would go alone, feeling weird and out of place, and the memories would all be sad memories of how little it was compared to how much they’d thought it would be. Oh, it stirs my heart to remember youth! These occasions all so special, all so fleeting as we race toward adulthood! How sad for Carl and Sunni they would not have a chance to experience the exquisite delight of a big, high-school dance as seniors and in love.

Or, should I say, how sad it was **they thought** they would not be able to experience such a gift?

It was after soccer practice on the week of the big homecoming game and dance, each of which had been held on a Friday evening for some 100 years. Carl had just finished practice and was heading toward his car, as theater practice would not be held in light of the homecoming festivities. Carl was sweaty and dirty, having opted to head straight home, wearing his little shorts and flouncy tank top, feeling tired and gross. As he made his way around the building toward the parking lot, Matt stepped out of the shadows and blocked his path.

Carl sighed. He was so not in the mood for this. "I'm running late," he said, trying to step around Matt.

Matt blocked him. "You're so hot," Matt said.

Carl rolled his eyes. "I really need to get home."

Matt advanced into Carl's space. Carl backed up. Matt advanced. Carl's back bumped against the side of the building. Matt put a possessive hand on Carl's hip. "I want you to go to the dance with me."

Carl tried to slip away, and Matt pressed his body against Carl, pinning him against the wall like a bug. "I can't stop thinking about you," Matt said.

"You're going with Kennedy."

"I'll break it off. I just know we're supposed to be together." Matt reached for Carl's chin, and Carl yanked his head away. "Asshole!" Carl screamed, and he did what his Mom had told him to do if a boy ever got too rough. He kneed Matt right in the groin.



“Bitch!” Matt gasped, folding over.

Carl ran, sprinting toward the parking lot. He glanced back to see Matt in pursuit, one hand cupping his groin, his eyes burning with rage.

Carl sprinted toward the parking lot. He just had to hope when he cleared the corner of the building there would be other kids there in the parking lot—witnesses, people who could help. He could hear Matt’s footsteps getting closer... closer... he could hear Matt’s ragged breathing....

The corner. He just had to get to the corner. “Stay away from me!” He yelled.

“Just listen,” Matt said. “I only want to talk.”

Carl felt Matt grab his ponytail, yank. Carl stumbled; the world tumbled around him as he fell to the ground. “Keep your mouth shut,” Matt growled, standing over Carl, who’d fallen to his knees. Carl’s heart raced; his chest heaved. Every part of him wanted to scream, to run, but he just—froze, staring up at Matt.

Matt smiled down at him. “Just stay there. Just like that,” Matt said.

“Bro,” a deep voice called. “What’s the trouble?”

Carl yelped, rolling to his feet, running and throwing himself into Sunni’s arms.

“No trouble, bro,” Matt said, backing away. “We were just playing around.” Matt retreated the way he’d come.

Sunni hugged Carl tight, all those strange urges she'd been feeling toward him coming back 1000 times stronger.

"Omigod," Carl gasped, hugging Sunni, impulsively kissing her on the neck. "Omigod."

"You okay?" Sunni said, smoothing his hair. "What— did he try something?"

"I'm okay. I'm— thanks to you," Carl said, feeling so safe and protected, wanting to just stay there in Sunni's arms.

Sunni, however, began to feel an embarrassing stirring, so she moved Carl away and started running the times tables in her head. Carl felt confused, a little hurt. She'd seemed so friendly, and why was she pushing him away, breaking eye contact?

Sunni almost just made excuses and left. The thought of her pants tenting in public horrified her. She still didn't want to believe she had a boy thing, and she surely didn't want it on display. Yet, she felt she needed to talk to Carl about safety. It was too important. She knew he hadn't been raised a girl. Didn't know the rules. The dangers.

I feel I must intrude at this point and offer one of my commentaries. Please indulge this old fool, dear reader. I do try and resist my urge to comment on the action, but sometimes, well, my typing fingers just get the best of me. And so, I crack my knuckles and proceed:

The world remains a dangerous place for females. This danger does not come from disease. Indeed, females have a

stronger immune system than males. Nor does it arise from the long held and statistically unsupported notion that women make terrible drivers. In fact, they are safer drivers than men.

So, from where does this increased threat of violence arise? Dragons? Spiders? Hungry ghosts? None of the above. The greatest threat to females comes from males. Yes. Sad but true. Therefore, from the time they are young, girls are taught to be cautious. To be careful. To avoid putting themselves in situations where even a seemingly harmless male might attack them. They receive this training from mothers, grandmothers, all passing down the lore of the female— that men are dangerous. Females must be on guard.

When Carl was small, he heard the phrase “stranger danger.” He was cautioned. But, as with most males, as he got older, bigger and stronger, parental concern dropped away. Carl was not warned about the snares and traps that awaited a female, even at her own school.

And so, Sunni, feeling all sorts of warm, protective feelings toward slender little Carl, gestured for him to take a seat at a picnic table. “What?” Carl said, rubbing his knee. When he’d hit the ground, he’d bumped it and it was throbbing.

“Just— sit,” Sunni said, mentally running those timetables, trying to keep the tent pole from rising.

Carl sat on the table, his feet on the bench. He looked at his knee, pleased to see he hadn’t broken the skin.

“Carl,” Sunni said. “Maybe this isn’t my place, but you shouldn’t be walking around alone if you can avoid it.”

“What? That’s stupid.”

“Look what just happened,” Sunni said.

“That’s not my fault!”

‘It’s not your fault, and it’s not fair, but it’s different for girls. We — you— have to be careful. Walk back to the parking lot with some of the other girls from the team. Don’t go out alone at night. It’s dangerous for females, especially one as pretty as you.”

Carl’s initial annoyance at Sunni’s message melted away. The caring tone of Sunni’s deep, powerful voice, the look of compassion in her eyes, the fact that she’d protected him and was still being protective.... And she’d called him— pretty! His heart fluttered, and he longed to find himself in her arms. Some subconscious part of him took over. He put a hand to his cheek. “I— never— omigod.” He felt tears welling up in his eyes, and he let them.

‘Carl. Hey. Er.” Sunni felt herself getting all knotted up. The sight of Carl starting to cry, the feminine gestures. She wanted to tell him it would be okay, but her verbal ability seemed to flee in the presence of a weeping female.

Carl looked at her, letting his tear-filled eyes get wider. A small sob escaped his lips. He could have opened his arms, invited her in, but he wanted her to make the move to wrap her arms around him...

Sunni, bereft of words, felt she had no choice. She couldn’t just stand there and let him cry. She climbed onto the picnic table and threw one of her meaty arms over Carl’s slender shoulders, pulling him in so he rested his head against her chest.

Carl's whole body tingled, and he hid a smile as he nuzzled against Sunni's hard form. She smelled so good! *Omigod*, he thought. *What is that?* He wiggled closer, putting a hand on her stomach. He could hear her heart beating in her chest—the steady thump so calming and strong, and he felt like he'd never felt this close to anyone ever. It was all so strange. The way his body felt. The way his mind was all fuzzy. He'd never felt like this before, and he loved it.

Sunni felt a wave of confusing masculine emotions swirling in her head. Holding Carl felt so good, and she felt so strong and powerful, and yet her new “friend” was starting to get excited again, and she was in torment both reveling in the feel of Carl's soft little body pressed against hers, the smell of his strawberry shampoo, and horrified at what all those fun and enjoyable sensations were causing to happen in her pants.

Instinct took over. She put a hand on Carl's soft thigh. He moaned, sending shockwaves through her body. Carl put a hand on her arm and squeezed. They shifted, entwined, neither thinking, just moving, doing what their bodies insisted. Their lips met, tongues... Not even aware of what he was doing, Carl let his hand trail down Sunni's rock-hard abs, down until he touched something hard—

“Ahhhhhh!” Carl screamed and scooted away from Sunni.

“Oh, shit,” Sunni said, blushing under her beard as she covered the bulge in her pants with both hands, turning away so Carl couldn't see her woody. “I'm sorry!” She said. “This stupid thing! It just keeps popping up!”

Carl started to giggle. He'd been shocked as much by the fact that he'd touched a— thing— as he'd been surprised to find Sunni hard, but now seeing her reaction he couldn't help but laugh.

"It's not funny!" Sunni said. "I'm so sorry."

"Welcome to being a guy," Carl said, covering his mouth, trying to stifle his laughter. "I wish you could see your face right now."

"Haha," Sunni said, unable to get over her humiliation. "This is terrible. It keeps doing — you know."

"I do know," Carl said. "That's why— I'm sorry I laughed, but it was because I've been there."

"But— how do you keep it down? Is there a secret?"

"Just practice," Carl said. "I used to think about baseball."

"I've been trying that," Sunni said, pushing. "And math."

Carl giggled. "You love math. Maybe think of something you find super boring."

Sunni concentrated. "It's working. Thank God. Again, I am so sorry."

"That thing has a mind of its own," Carl said.

"The way you screamed!"

"I just wasn't expecting it," Carl said, still giggling. "I mean, you know. I'm not used to being on this side and I never even thought— don't worry about it, really. I won't tell anyone."

Sunni sighed. "He— it's— going to sleep."

“What did you think about?”

“Cloud Atlas. That movie. Boring.”

Carl laughed. “Has anyone ever watched the whole thing?”

“Maybe a masochist.”

It was quiet for a moment. The only sound was the breeze rustling the fading leaves. Then, Sunni chuckled. Carl giggled. Sunni laughed and Carl laughed. They both laughed and slapped knees and shook heads. “Aren’t we the most messed up teen-agers ever,” Sunni said.

“Right?” Carl said.

“Let me walk you to your car,” Sunni said.

Carl felt another little thrill go through him. “Sure.”

As they walked toward the parking lot, an idea grew in Sunni’s mind. *No. I can’t*, she thought. *It’s dumb. I better not. We are sworn enemies*. But then, she considered that maybe she was just afraid, and that if she didn’t act on her maybe crazy dumb idea that she would regret it. “I want you to come to the dance with me,” she said as they turned the corner.

“Like— a date?” Carl said, looking up at her.

Sunni couldn’t read the tone of Carl’s voice. Was that horror? Contempt? For a millisecond, Sunni thought about laughing it off, claiming that she’d been joking. But no. She’d meant it and so she plunged ahead. “Yeah. Will you go to the dance with me, Miss Carli Bright?”

There was a pause. To Sunni it felt like forever. She was sure she was about to be shot down, that Carl was going to laugh in her face. Word would get all over school that she'd asked him, and he'd been like- in your dreams!

But then the sweetest, prettiest smile spread across Carl's face, and his big, innocent eyes sparkled. "I'd love that!"

Sunni laughed with relief. "Cool! Cool! Cool!"

They started back toward the parking lot. Carl bumped into Sunni on purpose. Sunni bumped back, careful not to use too much of her weight and accidentally knock Carl over. The eyes of the kids hanging out in the parking lot scanned them, everyone curious but also teen cool and wanting to pretend they didn't care.

"Everyone's looking," Carl said with a grin.

They'd arrived at Carl's car. "Let's give 'em something to text about," Sunni said. Just like that, Carl stepped forward, tilted his head back. Sunni put her hands on his hips and kissed him. Just long enough. "Bye!" Carl sang as he ducked into his car.

"Later," Sunni said, stepping back so he could pull out.

She got into her car, nodding. This, she decided, was a good day.





## CHAPTER 21

Carl, on the other hand, began to freak his emotions raging like those of any teenager. Why did I say yes? I can't go to the dance with a guy, even if she was a girl— but he's so cute, though— do I like her? Him? Am I going crazy? What will everyone say? I should call it off. I should tell Kennedy! I should .... I don't know what to do!

Resting beneath this menagerie of emotional action figures pitched in relentless combat was a thick, warm quilt of sweet cuddly feelings, an afterglow, as it were, of their second kiss, made all the sweeter by the feeling on Carl's part that he had used his feminine wiles to lure Sunni into putting those big, manly arms around him.

As he walked into the house, Carl felt he was walking on air, one thought rising above all the others: *Omigod! I'm going to the dance with Sunni!*

Mom was on the couch, idly toying with her Smart Pad while half watching some wrinkly old judge scream at people fighting over a scratched table. She glanced over at Carl, instantly pushing down her newfound jealousy at his young figure, his young skin... "Hey."

"Yes," Carl responded in a dreamy voice. "I do like carrots." He wandered over to the patio doors and looked out, sighing as he lifted one heel, started twisting his hair around his fingers.

Mom did a double take. That tone of voice. That faraway look in Carl's eyes. The pensive way he now looked longingly out the patio doors. Could it be? She turned off the television, dropped her

Smart Pad and, trying to be as nonchalant as possible, wandered over to the kitchen. “How was school today?” She asked, pretending to look for something in the refrigerator.

“Oh,” Carl said with another soft sigh. “It was fine.” Like most teen-agers, he had an instinctive need to hide his feelings and the “real” of his life from his parents.

“Anything unusual happen?” Mom kept her tone flat, almost off-hand, not wanting to alert the wary teenager to her prying.

Carl glanced back at her. She could see it in his eyes. He wanted to tell her. Was fighting with himself.

Like the skilled interrogator that she’d become over the years, Mom waited, an expectant, non-judgy look on her face.

Carl started to speak, then stopped. Looked off to the backyard.

Mom hid her annoyance, but just as she was trying to think of a new angle, Carl suddenly spun around, his face bright with excitement. “Sunni asked me to the dance!”

Though Mom had easily discerned that her oldest boy was now a girl crushing like crazy on someone, the news that it was Sunni stunned her. She reeled. Put a hand to her forehead. “Sunni?”

“I know!” Carl stomped one foot. “It was like— and I was like — then we were both like— you know?”

“I thought you two hated each other.”

“We do. Did. I don’t know anymore.”

“So, what did you say? When she asked you to the dance?”

“Yes,” Carl said, rolling his eyes. ‘I mean, I didn’t want to be rude! But, now I am so— I don’t know. It’s— going to the dance with Sunni? I wonder if I should back out. What should I do?’ He walked up to Mom and took her hand. ‘Tell me what to do.’”

Mom nodded. This was another chance to overcome her jealousy of her gorgeous son. Be supportive. Bond. “First,” Mom said. “Go upstairs and take a shower. Then, put on something cute. We’re going to the mall.”

“Mall? What?”

“You need a new dress for the dance!”

Carl started to object. Mom put a finger over his mouth.

“New dress. While you’re getting ready, I’ll make an appointment at the salon.”

“Dress? Salon? Mom, it’s just the homecoming dance.”

“Carli. Dear? You have so much to learn about being a girl. Now— scoot!”

Carl did what he was told, completely mystified and yet— kinda loving the way his Mom was totally looking out for him. In truth, his mind had been sufficiently girlified that the thought of shopping and a salon trip made him a little giddy.

While Carl got ready to go shopping with his mom, Sunni found herself sprawled on her bed reading a yellowed, paperback copy of *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. She’d found it

on the bookshelf in the “library” as they called Dad’s home office. He’d mentioned it over the years, and it seemed to have had an impact on him back in his college years. With the weird change in their relationship dynamic, she wanted to find some way to understand him better, maybe talk to him about something that wouldn’t trigger his insecurities.

She’d come upon a quote that perfectly summed up her own feelings about her strange and fleeting senior year:

*“We’re in such a hurry most of the time we never get much chance to talk. The result is a kind of endless day-to-day shallowness, a monotony that leaves a person wondering years later where all the time went and sorry that it’s all gone. ”*

Everything was changing, and she had long understood logically the progression her life would take. She would leave the only home she’d ever known soon, to go off on her own. Her friends, some of whom she’d known since kindergarten, would scatter to different colleges, different lives. Her mother and father, she knew, would grow more and more distant, less and less central to her life. That was all going to happen, but the whole process had been accelerated by her change. She’d expected to have her whole senior year to have deep conversations with her friends, to engage in a series of small, rolling goodbyes leading up to the big ones, the ones that might be forever at graduation, or when people went off to college.

She looked at her big, calloused man hands. But then, the Sunni she’d been had been erased, replaced by this- man boy she’d become. Her friends already looked at her like a stranger, and all

conversations were awkward, uncomfortable. She'd lost her teammates, would not be there for their games, their awards banquet.

A tear ran down her cheek, and she went to the window. The leaves of the old oak outside her window had flared a bright red, but were already fading, turning rust colored, and some had fallen, drifting to scatter on the ground at the base of the tree. Sunni felt like one of those leaves on the ground, separate but still in the presence of the tree that had once given her life. Whoever had done this had taken more than just her body, her identity. They'd taken her life. All her friends were gone, and she would never get to have all the experiences she should have had as a senior in high school.

Anger. Hotter than she'd ever felt. She wanted to find the person who did this, beat them down. But she couldn't, so her anger sought a new target.

Matt. The thought of him and Carli made her gnash her teeth, and she clenched her fist, wanting to smash his face. All the girls knew of his reputation as the kind of boy who didn't take no for an answer. And, what had happened to Carli? Just about every girl had a story like that— some entitled boy getting aggressive, stalkery. All the pent up anger she'd ever had toward society and men and the way women were treated boiled over, and she reared back, meaning to punch her fist right through the stupid window, watch the shards of glass tumble, flashing in the sunlight—

*Whoa. Hold on.* She pulled back, shocked at how angry she'd felt, how quick she'd come to getting physical, smashing something. *I better go work out, she decided. Before I kill someone.*



## CHAPTER 22

Sunni pushes a 25-pound plate onto each end of the barbell in the garage. Grabs it. Squeezes the gnarled steel. Snatches it right from the ground over her head. Laughs. This is what she used to life as a girl. It now feels like lifting air.

Carl sitting in a big, cushy chair while one girl works on his fingernails and another his toes. The air smells of violets, and the gentle sounds of waterfalls chime in the background. He and mom are chatting about this and that, he hardly knows, but there is something warming and fun about chatting, and he has never felt more relaxed.

The slabs of cold iron gleam. Four thick, 45- pound plates. With the weight of the bar: 225 pounds. Sunni grips the gnarl. Plants her feet. *Can I really lift this?* She wonders. Taking a deep breath, she snatches it right off the ground, popping her hips forward and bouncing the bar right up over her head. She holds it over her head for a moment. Laughs. *Fuck, I'm strong*, she thinks, dropping the bar, letting the weight clang against the floor.

Carl comes out of the dressing room, a big smile on his face. He puts a hand on his hip and does a “model” pose, then twirls and does another, giggling. He’s wearing a tiny little black dress. Mom smiles and nods, but then says, “Let’s look at a couple more.” Carl won’t argue. He has discovered he loves trying on clothes. He pauses at the mirror outside the dressing room and sees how the



dress hugs his curves, the swell of his cleavage nestled in the plunging neckline. *Damn, I'm hot*, he thinks, tossing his hair.

Power cleans give way to deadlifts, give way to bench presses. Sunni's hard body is slick with sweat, and droplets gleam in her beard. She has 250 pounds on the barbell, more than she's ever lifted, and she is doing reps, lifting it again and again and again. She strains on the last attempt, pushing her feet into the floor, arching her back to push the weight that last inch up so she can rest it on the clamps. She doesn't feel tired. She only feels the need for more.

Carl doesn't feel tired, either. He's in his bra and panties, holding up the latest little scrap of fabric his mom has picked out for him. This one is powder blue with a floor length skirt. It seems a little—dowdy— but Mom has been in Pinterest and insists this is in style. Carl isn't so sure. He steps into the dress, slips it up and— Oh. Wow. He looks— so pretty. The dress leaves his little round shoulders bare, and it makes him look like— royalty or something. It's so feminine, he feels all bubbly inside looking at himself, grabbing the skirt and kind of waving it around like a matador waving her cape. He is almost scared to walk out in this dress, to have anyone see him in it. The other dresses were sexy. This one is gorgeous. Mom calls for him. Heart fluttering, Carl steps out of the dressing room, cheeks blushing. Mom covers her mouth. "Oh, my," she says. Carl turns so she can zip him up, and he feels the dress grow tight around his body. They go to the mirror together, Mom standing behind him, Carl in front, beaming.

"What do you think?" Carl asks.

"Lovely," Mom says.

“How much is it?” Carl asks, almost hoping for an excuse to say no to the dress.

“Who cares?” Mom says, then with a wicked smile. “Nothing is too good for my son.”

Sunni has thrown off her t-shirt. She has thick black hair on her chest, ridges of abs. She’s doing crunches, grunting in her deep voice. Her abs are burning, and she loves the burn. Needs the burn. When she reaches 200 she roars, pops onto her feet and grabs a 20 pound slam ball, lifting it over her head and hurling it to the ground, catching it as it bounces back up, lifting it, hurling it back down—the ball makes a loud whomp as it smashes into the floor, and Sunni loves the violence of this, feels it through her whole body...

The salesgirl is strapping a pair of open toes heels onto Carl’s dainty foot. He LOVES these shoes in a deep, soulful way he has never loved shoes before. His Mom seems to love them, too. They’ve been at the mall for hours, but instead of getting bored and annoyed, Carl is buzzing, getting more hyper. He needs to shop! Carl has never worn heels, but the splicer has taken care of it. He stands and glides effortlessly across the floor, his walk so smooth and feminine that women around the shoe department stop and stare in admiration. Mom is no different. She’d thought he might stumble and struggle, but he moves in his heels like he’s been taking modeling classes since he was five. Her jealousy flares for a moment. He is more graceful than her, more feminine, better at being female. But she pushes those feelings away, decides she should be happy for him. If he is to be a woman, it’s better that he be able to turn on the femininity, she feels. It will open a lot of doors.

And he can still have some days of sweats and a baseball hat if he wants. Being a girl it's like that.

Sunni is cooling down, rolling out her hamstrings on a foam roller. She feels hungry. Her appetite in this big male body is off the charts, and it is a little consolation to her that she can now EAT. She plans to load up on protein. Turn all that work into muscle. She's making a mental checklist: she needs protein powder, creatine, recovery powder. If she's gonna be stuck as a guy, she wants to be strong. She wants to be able to kick some ass.

Carl's Mom has a list. They are walking back to the car, loaded with shopping bags. "Right after school, you'll get your hair and makeup done," Mom says. "Then, you just have to be careful until Sunni comes to pick you up."

"I can do my own hair and makeup," Carl says, because he feels he should object, not because he isn't excited about the idea.

"You have so much to learn about being a girl," Mom says.



## CHAPTER 23

“It’s the Kardashians,” Kennedy explained. “And social media. There’s so much pressure to be perfect all the time, and all it takes is one bad video on TikTok, and you are immortal for all the wrong reasons.”

“Incredible,” Carl said. “I mean, I sort of heard about it, you know? Around? Like, girls getting nose jobs and stuff.”

“Exactly. And boob jobs. So, yeah, professional makeup for a high-school dance? It’s the new normal.”

They were chatting after school, each girl with her phone in her hands, constantly glancing at their alerts and texts. “It seems weird,” Carl said, finding himself far more interested now that he was the one facing all the pressure to be stylish and pretty. Not that he had to worry about nose jobs or boob jobs. He was, as has been stated, angelic, a marvel of feminine perfection. But peer pressure being what it was and high-school being high-school, even a girl as pretty as Carl had to keep up with the latest fashions, shades of lipstick, shifting trends and styles. Especially if she wanted to be popular, which Carl most certainly did.

“Weird?”

“Yeah. I don’t know. I see all these things about women’s progress, and women directors and scientists. I just thought, you know, things had changed?”

“They have, but they haven’t,” Kennedy said. “I mean, feel free to join the science club, but you’ll never be one of the cool kids that way.”

The day of the dance, Carl went right to the salon after school. He sat patiently skimming through an issue of Glamour, reading about Gal Gadot's workout routine, thinking he should spend more time doing squats and lunges. He'd decided to go with big, glamorous hair, and the girl had added body and some curl, so Carl's hair framed his face in thick, golden waves. Then, he went to have his makeup done.

Though he'd been implanted with a sound makeup game, he still took the opportunity to quiz the cosmetologist, picking up some tips he knew he would make part of his daily makeup routine. When she finished, he looked at himself, beaming with pride. "You really are good," Carl said, smiling, turning his face this way and that, admiring how he looked from different angles.

"Thanks," Maria, the makeup artists said, giggling. "I mean, with a girl as pretty as you? It's just— you're gorgeous!" She gushed.

"Thank you!" Carl said, sucking in his cheeks to emphasize his dimples. "You're really pretty, too."

Sunni had gone home and done some pushups, chin ups, crunches. She wanted her muscles to be pumped. She took a shower, put on a dress shirt, good jeans, a tie with she didn't pull all the way up, but let hang loose around her open collar. She'd asked some of the other guys about the jeans, wondering if she should wear dress pants, but they'd all scoffed. "This isn't a formal," Jake had said. "Only the dorks are going to be dressed like they're going to church."

As she checked herself out in the mirror, she couldn't help but note, once again, the inequality between boys and girls. She knew what Carl was going through right now, had been going through, and

how much time he was spending to get ready, while all she did was throw on some clothes that really weren't that different from what she wore every day. It seemed to her, and I will agree, that the extra time she'd been forced to spend as a girl worrying about fashion, hair and makeup amounted to a huge mental disadvantage, because while she'd been doing all that, the average boy just gave his t-shirt a smell, threw it on and ran a hand through his hair. Done.

It bothered her she was getting off so easy, and she vowed that she would work, as a man as that seemed to be her fate, for more fashion equality. Yet, she did look good in those jeans, and the tailored dress shirt hugged her rigidly muscled frame.

Her phone buzzed. Sunni took her eyes off the mountain of man in the mirror and glanced at the message, at first idly, and then with interest. It was from Dad, and it read, "meet me on the porch."

*What's this all about?* Sunni wondered. She shrugged and headed down. As fall had advanced, the leaves had now all turned, the backyard ablaze in reds and golds. Dad was standing with his back against the rail, two dark, sweaty bottles of Sam Adams next to him. "Looking good," he said as Sunni approached.

"Thanks," Sunni said. "My first dance as a guy."

"Nervous?"

"Yeah," Sunni admitted.

Dad handed Sunni one of the bottles of beer. "Let's have a beer together."

"Really?" Sunni said, looking at the bottle like it might explode. *Is this some kind of test?* She wondered.

"Yeah," Dad said, giving her a little pat on the arm. "It's a tradition in our family that father and son have a beer when the son turns 18."

I would have done it sooner, but well, um—“

“I get it,” Sunni said, finding herself touched and moved by this gesture. She’d been feeling so distant from everyone, and especially her dad. “I wasn’t— quite— your son then.” The words sounded strange to her— calling herself “your son.” And yet, saying it out loud brought a release of stress she hadn’t even known she was holding.

They each twisted the caps off their bottles. Dad held his toward her, and they clinked them together. They each took a drink. Dad made a satisfied sighing sound. Sunni made a sour face and forced herself to swallow. “Good,” she lied, coughing. “Sam Adams.”

“That’s not your first beer?” Dad said, surprised by her reaction.

“No,” Sunni said, smelling the top of the bottle. “I had some before, but it was— more like water. Maybe Budweiser.”

“Piss water,” Dad sneered. “This is the good stuff.”

Sunni took another sip. Swished it around her mouth. “It’s definitely stronger.”

“You don’t have to finish it,” Dad said.

“It’s a ritual,” Sunni said. “I’m gonna drink it down.”

“Good man,” Dad said. In fact, he felt like he was talking to a man, and not at all to his little girl. Yet, he knew she was in there, and he was determined to be her father no matter what.

Perhaps the reader is wondering, what happened to all that Oedipal stress we’d seen earlier in the story? Did the writer merely forget? Indeed, not. In fact, Sunni’s father had struggled mightily with his feelings of inadequacy, and with his largely subconscious fears that Sunni was replacing him as the man of the house. When his wife had gone out and bought an SUV for Sunni despite the fact



he'd expressly stated he opposed the idea, it had triggered him to the point that he had plotted to find some excuse to ground Sunni, take her phone, do everything he could to let her know her place. In fact, he'd even planned to sneak into her room at night and shave off her arrogant beard.

But then, he'd gone to work and sat down at his desk. Arrayed across the front of his desk, to the right of his computer monitor, were framed pictures of his wife and Sunni— through her many stages. There was Sunni as a little baby, Sunni dressed in a onesie, Sunni at her first dance recital, Sunni at 4th grade graduation... in all of them, she was beaming, the purest, prettiest smile on her face. As he'd looked across those pictures, Sunni's Dad had begun to cry. He was not a man prone to tears, but the pictures had warmed his heart and driven away the hate, and what he'd remembered and rediscovered was the pure love he had for his wonderful daughter.

Indeed, many days when he'd suffered setbacks, or not felt like working, he'd looked at those pictures and remembered that he was doing all of this for her, to provide her with the kind of life and opportunities she deserved.

The anger and resentment he'd been feeling toward her now shamed him. She was not his little girl anymore. She'd changed. But she was still Sunni, and she was still a miracle, the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Once the tears had subsided, he determined to do better, to be the father he'd always sworn to be. Sunni was his son now, and he would be there for her the same as always.

And so, he'd put aside his ego, and he had remembered to be a man, and a father, and to love and take care of his child no matter

what.

“Dad? Are you okay?”

Dad realized with a start that he’d been lost in thought, and that there were tears rolling down his cheeks.

Sunni had never seen her dad cry. To her he had always seemed the strongest person in the world, and it shocked her now and even scared her a little to see the tears on his cheeks.

Dad — smiled. He told her about the pictures on his desk. How he’d been thrown off by her changes, and how he’d realized how much he loved her, and that he would always love her. Sunni was now crying as well, and the two exchanged a hug.

Dad took a swig of his beer. Sunni did as well. They were each now feeling a little masculine embarrassment at their emotional outburst. “Well, that happened,” Dad said.

“Yeah,” Sunni said. “It did.”

They drank their beers in silence for a time, just staring out at the yard, watching some squirrels skittering around, gathering nuts for the winter. “I have to get going pretty soon,” Sunni said, checking the time on her phone.

“One more thing,” Dad said, fishing in his pocket and pulling out a little rectangular packet.

“Is that? Dad!” Sunni said, appalled to see her father trying to hand her a condom.

“You’re a guy now,” Dad said. “We can — lose control sometimes. It’s better to be prepared.”

“I’m not going to— with Carl?”

“Sunni? Son?” Dad said. “Just take it for your old man. I’ll feel better knowing you have protection if you need it.”

“Fine,” Sunni said, snatching the condom packet and shoving it in her pocket. “But I really have no plans to be— doing it.”

“Good. That’s good. Better to wait. Trust me.”

“Okay,” Sunni said, retreating before her father could start getting really gross and telling her about his sex life. “Gotta go! Bye!”

“Have fun! But not too much,” Dad said, enjoying the teasing now.

As soon as Sunni slipped back into her house, Mom seemed to materialize out of nowhere! “Oh, my handsome son off to his first dance!” Mom said, throwing her arms around him. “Make sure to get pictures!” She added while snapping one of Sunni.

Sunni headed toward the front door, eager to get away from her parents, who seemed to her to have gone completely bonkers.

“Bye!”

“Your Dad is right about the condom!” Mom called.

“Ahhhhh!” Sunni yelled, hurling herself out the door and practically running to her car.

## CHAPTER 24

Carl waited anxiously in his room, standing in front of his full-length mirror, turning side to side, striking model poses. Perched on the prettiest heels ever, wearing the prettiest dress, he'd never felt so utterly feminine. He'd heard that clothes made the man, and he could now conform that they also made the girl. When he was dressed in his sports clothes, playing soccer, he actually felt pretty butch, kinda like the same way he felt when he'd been a guy competing. But now? His face powdered and painted, his hair all glamorous and glittering, he felt like — a rose. A flower. Something rare and delicate to be protected.

And he liked the feeling.

Hearing the rumble of Sunni's big, SUV, his heart fluttered, and he grabbed his clutch purse. He'd been imagining his entrance since the day Sunni asked him to the dance, and he'd fallen in love with the idea of coming down the stairs while Sunni waited at the bottom, letting her drink in the sight of him as he gracefully floated down from the heavens.

Going to his bedroom door, he cracked it opened and listened, waiting for the right moment. The doorbell rang. He heard his parents greeting Sunni. She sounded nervous, and Carl thought that was cute. Then, Mom called, "Carli! Sunni's here!"

Carl pushed his shoulders back and walked out of his room, making his way to the head of the stairs, looking down to see Sunni's face light up in amazement at the sight of him. "Hey," Carl said, tugging on an earring, then descending the stairs, smiling his

brightest smile. His parents were both down there as well, standing behind Sunni, and he saw the wonder in all their eyes, the admiration. It made Carl feel validated, special. He needed to know he was pretty.

As Carl reached the bottom of the stairs, Sunni shook her head. "You're gorgeous," she said. "Stunning."

"Oh," Carl demurred, faking modesty.

"You look great," Dad said.

"So perfect. Pictures!" Mom declared. She had bought a fancy camera with a big lens. "Over here! By the French doors."

"Mom," Carl said, playing the role of the reluctant teen-age daughter to perfection.

"Come on," Sunni said, putting a hand on the small of Carl's back and guiding him toward the doors, from which a late afternoon golden light poured into the room. "My mom is gonna want copies."

"Of course."

Sunni had brought a corsage, and as Mom snapped pictures, she reached out to pin it to Carl's dress. Carl stared up at her, admiring how rugged and handsome she looked. It felt so right for him to be shorter, smaller. Then, he smiled. "Your hands are shaking."

Sunni's hands were, in fact, shaking. She chuckled. "I am terrified I'm going to poke you with this pin."

"No poking tonight," Dad said, adding a little *wah wah* tone to his voice to make it clear he meant it as a double-entendre.

"Daddy!" Carl squealed.

"Don't worry, Mr. Bright," Sunni said as she struggled to get the pin fixed. Her fingers were brushing against the soft flesh of Carl's

upper breast, and he was getting so... tingly again. "I will be a perfect lady." They all laughed at the joke.

"It's not you I'm worried about," Dad said.

"Um... Father?" Carl said, totally embarrassed his dad was making jokes about— THAT.

Sunni finally got the corsage pinned on, and Carl dutifully smiled and said, "It's so pretty! Thank you."

"Now, the couple together," Mom said, circling, squatting, shooting the scene like it was a royal wedding.

Sunni slipped her arm around Carl's waist. Carl put his hand on her back. They smiled and Mom snapped away. "Okay, now..."

"I think we need to let these two lovebirds get to the dance," Dad said, intervening.

Relieved, both Carl and Sunni headed right for the door, Carl assuring his parents he loved them...etc...

"You take care of my daughter," Dad called as Sunni helped Carl into her car.

"I will!" Sunni said.

"Have her back by 11!"

"Will do!"

As soon as Sunni pulled out of the driveway and headed toward school, she and Carl both gasped, their whole bodies relaxing. "I am so sorry about my parents!" Carl said. "They are so weird."

"Weird? My Dad gave me a condom!"

"What?"

"He was worried I would lose control of what he called my 'manly' impulses."

Carl snickered. "Omigod."

“Yeah. Tell me about it.”

They both laughed, then, thinking about all the changes, their poor parents. “This has to be totally freaking them out,” Carl said. “I mean— look at us!”

Sunni glanced over at Carl. “I could look at you all night.”

“Oh,” Carl said, but he felt his cheeks warm at the compliment—as well as the look in Sunni’s eyes.

When they got to the dance, they went through all the usual rituals. They walked in together, greeted all their friends, exchanging compliments, hugs. They stopped by the selfie station and did their picks, and then had professional pictures taken under an arch of roses because that’s what you did. Finally, they found themselves inside the gym, which had been converted into the “dance hall” with balloons and streamers and mood lighting. It was early, so no one was on the floor dancing yet, and Carl and Sunni found themselves standing next to each other awkwardly, trying to figure out what to say or do. “I see the girls put a lot more work into getting ready than the guys,” Carl noted.

“It’s so unfair,” Sunni agreed. Then, wanting to create some space before Carl said anything about her jeans, she said, “let me get us some punch.”

“That would be lovely,” Carl said, idly swishing the skirt of his dress. While Carl had begun to accept that he was a girl now, and it had even started to seem a little normal for him to be going to school as a girl, the dance upended whatever comfort level he had found. This was his first dance as a girl, and he felt very self-conscious now — in a dress, make-up... the whole feminine thing suddenly

seeming wrong and embarrassing. He saw a couple girls looking in his direction, whispering, and he wondered, “Are they talking about me? Making fun of me because I’m— this?”

He felt like he was shrinking, and that he’d been a fool to not only come to the dance but to wear a dress— this dress! Showing off his little arms, the swelling of his breasts. When Sunni came back carrying cups of punch, he moved in close and said, “I want to leave.”

“What? Did I do something?”

“No. It’s that— look at me. I’m supposed to be a boy. I feel ridiculous.”

“Hey, hey, hey...” Sunni said, cupping his chin, tilting his head back. “It’s okay. You’re gorgeous.”

“I think people are talking about me,” Carl said, glancing around. “Making fun of me. Take me home. *Please.*”

Sunni led Carl a little bit further away from the ring of people nervously eyeing the dance floor. “Look, if that’s really what you want. But—“

‘It is.’

“But, if you run away now, let your fears win, what’re you going to do for the rest of your life? If you are going to be Carli?”

“I don’t know. I can’t think right now.”

“Do you trust me?” Sunni said, taking each of Carl’s soft little hands in her own. Holding them tight.

“Yes?” Carl said.

“Then run into the storm with me.”

“What does that—“



Sunni pulled Carl forward, out of the darkness and right into the middle of the floor, right in the circle of light. BTS' "Dynamite" was thumping over the sound system, and Carl was shaking his head, feeling totally exposed. "Sunni!"

"Dance," Sunni said, keeping hold of his hands, moving her body. "Everybody is watching!"

"Oh my God!" Carl whispered. He started moving as well, a little stiff, awkward, self-conscious.

Sunni leaned in close. "I know you can dance better than that." Then, she wrapped her arms around Carl, dipped him, brought him up and sent him twirling. The kids clapped, and Carl gave Sunni a look that said— you're on! He now remembered years of ballet and jazz dance, hip hop classes, things that must have been spliced in during his changes, and he started to move, letting his body flow, raising his arms over his head and shaking his booty. Sunni started breaking out her moves, all kinds of hip-hop street dances, popping and breaking.... Other kids started to swarm the floor, excited to get in on the fun, and when the song ended Carl twirled himself right into Sunni's arms, which she wrapped around his waist, lifting him off the ground and kissing him on the neck.

"You guys are so amazing!" Kennedy said.

Matt fist bumped Sunni, which annoyed Carl. How could people treat such a jerk like he was just a regular person? And yet, Carl knew it was the way of things. Guys could get away with so much. Everyone just kind of acted like nothing ever happened. He was the same way when he'd been guy, but now that he was a girl it really pissed him off. But, what he could do?

“Did you take couples dance classes or something?” Kennedy asked.

“Just goofing around,” Carl answered breezily, but he was staring at Sunni, his eyes filled with feminine pride and gratitude. She’d totally saved him! The thought of maybe putting that condom to use fluttered through his mind, and he admonished himself in shock.

*No! You are not that kind of girl!*

As they made their way off the dance floor, Carl grabbed Sunni’s hand. She looked down at him, and he beamed up at her. She really was an amazing guy, and he was totally crushing on her now after she’d saved him from his panic attack. Sunni for her part was feeling quite the manly man, and looking down into Carl’s bright, smooth face, she felt proud to have such a pretty girl at her side. They found themselves standing among a group of kids— it was the most popular kids in school— and both of them realized that they were back as the king and queen of Carrolwood, only swapped and now THE IT couple of the whole school.

Some of the kids went off to get high. Carl and Sunni declined. “You can go if you want,” Sunni said. “I won’t judge you.”

“I don’t like the feeling of losing control,” Carl said after the other kids left. “I know that’s why other people do it, but to me it’s just an absolutely terrible feeling.” As they talked, Carl found himself desperately wanting a kiss. When he was a guy, he would have just kissed a girl if he wanted to. But now, it didn’t seem right for him to be so— aggressive? Besides, he wanted Sunni to need to kiss him. It was all part of the romance!

“I know what you mean,” Sunni said in a flat, emotionless tone. “I like feeling in control, being aware of everything. I don’t see why

anyone would want to make numb themselves to their experiences.”

*Come on a kiss me you big oaf*, Carl thought. He played with his hair, and smiled, trying to give a “come on” look with his eyes.

“Sensual experience is the stuff of life,” Carl said.

“That’s a good line,” Sunni said. She saw how Carl was looking at her, the way he played with his hair. She knew what he wanted, she and wanted to kiss him. But, the sight of Carl playing with his hair was giving causing Sunni to feel a growing problem—the same one she’d been fighting since becoming a dude. She started thinking of baseball again. “Who said that?”

*Time for the big guns*, Carl decided, frustration growing that Sunni wasn’t being driven insane with desire by his flirting. Carl opened the clutch purse dangling from his wrist and fished out a tube of lipstick. “I did. Just now,” he said. Looking into his compact, he touched up his lipstick, carefully brushing the tube across his plush lips, then taking a finger and running it along his bottom lip before finishing by running his tongue across his upper lip.

Sunni lost control. She grabbed Carl and pulled him to her, crushing their bodies together as she smothered him in a kiss. The near violence of the act was everything to Carl, the sense that Sunni had become a wild animal driven mad with need for him, the feeling of being so small and weak and that hot, hungry kiss! He pressed himself against Sunni, their tongues meeting in salty fire, and ...

“No PDAS!” Mr. Ben said, sternly.

This time, though they heard Mr. Ben, Sunni and Carl kept kissing. It was just too good. Neither one had the willpower to even consider stopping.

“Ahem!” Mr. Ben said, clearing his throat. “Ahem!”

Mostly because they both needed to breath, they stopped kissing. "It's a school dance," Sunni said. "Kids gotta kiss."

Carl hid his smile. Sunni was such a bad boy.

"Rules are rules," Mr. Ben said.

"Are you telling me you'd be able to keep your hands off a girl this hot?" Sunni said.

"Sunni!"

"Miss Bright does look lovely this evening," Mr. Ben said. "Be good, you two."

"Bye," Sunni said.

Carl was buzzing. He was about to start hinting they should maybe sneak outside and make out in the bushes, when Kennedy came bopping into the scene. She grabbed Carl's hand. "Come on," she said. Then, she turned to Sunni. "We need to use the little girl's room."

Carl smiled apologetically. Sunni just waved, burning with need as she watched Carl hurry away, those bare little shoulders seeming to shine. She wanted to kiss him all over. Maybe it was for the best, she decided, that she had a minute to cool down and get the lower area under control.

Kennedy immediately plunged into one of the stalls. "That kiss was so hot!" She said.

"You saw?"

"Um, yeah I saw. Are you like totally wet right now?"

"Kennedy," Carl said.

"Oh, please," Kennedy said. "Girl!"

Carl went to the mirror and started to fix his makeup. His lipstick really did need fixing now. "It's so different being the girl."

“Oh. I’ve been dying to ask you. So, like, is it better or is kissing as a guy better?”

“It’s— different,” Carl said, thinking about it.

“Which is better, though?” Kennedy finished her business, there was a flush and the stall door banged open again.

Carl was still looking in the mirror, and as he met Kennedy’s eyes in the reflection, a naughty smile spread across his face. “It’s so much better as a girl.”

Kennedy’s smile matched his. “Do you like it, then? Being the girl now?”

Carl sighed, now turning to face her directly. “I— yeah— I guess I do.”

Just then, the bathroom door opened, and three girls came stumbling in, laughing and giggling and clearly a little drunk. Kennedy touched Carl on the arm, and they headed back to the dance.

Back inside, they found their dates, Sunni and Matt, hanging by the punch bowl. They were talking about MMA fighting. Kennedy and Carl stood dutifully by as their men talked, watching the dance, seeing who was flirting with someone other than their date, who was a wallflower, who was obviously so in love. Carl noticed Millmore surrounded by a group of guys, giggling and tossing his hair. He looked so happy Carl could only hate him a little for betraying he and Sunni, and also for having such good skin.

They each occasionally nodded or made supportive noises to make it seem like they were listening to the boys, but they could care less.

The music stopped and the lights slightly brightened. “Okay, kids,” the DJ said in his deep, standard issue DJ voice. “It’s time for the most romantic part of the whole evening. This is the song chosen by the Homecoming committee for the Couples Dance, so if you are a couple, or you want to be someone’s couple, take that girl or boy by the hand and get out on the floor because this is the greatest love song ever.”

With that, the first bars of “Unchained Melody” began to play. Carl’s heart fluttered. It was the perfect song for their first slow dance! He looked up at Sunni, waiting for her to reach out and take his hand. For a second, he thought she wasn’t going to, but then like a captain grabbing the wheel, she grabbed his hand and led him out onto the dance floor. This being their first slow dance in their new bodies, there was an awkward moment as they tried to figure out where to put their hands. Carl was used to being the taller one, and he and Sunni arm jousted for a second, but then Sunni decisively put her hands on Carl’s hips, and with her arms down there, Carl felt the only move that made sense of him was to lift his arms and put them on her shoulders, his hands behind her neck.

Carl felt supper vulnerable in that position, his soft chest pressed against hers, while she held him firmly and began to guide his movements. It was sweet perfection for Carl, and they stared adoringly into each other’s eyes as the Righteous Brothers sang:

Lonely rivers flow  
To the sea, to the sea  
To the open arms of the sea  
Lonely rivers sigh  
"Wait for me, wait for me"  
I'll be coming home, wait for me

Sunni slipped one of her hand around Carl's waist. They were rocking gently in each other's arms. Sunni leaned down and whispered, "You're the most beautiful girl in the world." The words, the feeling of her hot breath against his skin, made Carl shiver with delight, and all he could do was smile his prettiest smile, beaming up at Sunni, feeling the happiest he'd ever felt just to be there in his strong arms and know she thought he was so pretty. The song reached its climax:

I need your love  
I need your love  
God speed your love to me

Carl swooned, putting his head against Sunna's chest, feeling his knees go weak. Sunni held him, almost carrying him now, like a doll, and Carl let her, feeling so light and so cared for. Having Carl so utterly surrender to her, feeling him so helpless and soft in her arms, made Sunni burn with hunger, and as the music died away, she half guided, half carried him from the room and out into the cool night air.

They kissed and grabbed... hungry for the taste and feel of each other's bodies. Sunni took the lead, and Carl gladly followed. He wanted her to do whatever she wanted to him, and all he needed in the world was to go with the flow and be her girl. Panting. Grunting. Kisses on his neck and between his breasts... feeling her getting hard against him and sighing, feeling a sense of opening, a need to be filled...

And then Sunni pulled away.

"What is it?" Carl said, a strand of his blonde hair in his face. He lay on his side on the ground behind some bushes.

Sunni stood. "I'm about to lose control, babe," she said. "I need to get ahold of myself."

Carl was breathing heavy, his chest heaving. "It's okay," he said softly. "If you want to, you know?" He wanted it badly. Needed it. He felt like it would make him feel closer to Sunni than ever, and he longed for closeness, he wanted to know everything about her, to share all her dreams and to share her body.

Sunni shook her head. "No."

"What's wrong?" Carl said. "Why don't you want to?" He pulled up the top of his dress, which had slipped down scandalously during their makeup session. "Is it me?"

"Oh, no, no," Sunni said, seeing the insecurity slipping into Carl's pretty eyes. She didn't want to make him feel bad. She only wanted to protect him and love him as the sweet, vulnerable little female he'd become. She climbed down next to Carl, putting a hand to his soft cheek. "I want to. I mean— so bad. You're hot as hell."

"Then?"

"I want our first time to be special. You deserve better than this," she said gesturing at the bushes. "Getting laid in the dirt? You deserve candlelight and champagne. You're a princess."

*Princess.* Carl felt himself blush. He was, wasn't he? And even though his body was totally good to go, Sunni's romantic words, the fact that she was thinking about him and wanting to treat him special, because to her he was special? Impossibly, he began to cry.

Sunni's heart melted at the sight of the tears running down Carl's cheeks, the mascara running. "Oh, no," she said, freaking out. "What did I do? I'm sorry. I— I——"



“I’m not sad,” Carl said, wiping at his tears with the back of his hand. “I’m just so happy.”

‘Oh.’ Sunni pulled Carl in for a hug. *Females*, she thought. *Who can understand them?*



## CHAPTER 25

“You know there will be rumors,” Sunni said. She’d decided she wanted to go and lay out on the soccer field, look at the stars while they each cooled down from their epic and always to be remembered heavy petting session.

Carl was curled against Sunni, his head on her chest as he listened to the steady thumping of her heartbeat. “There always are.”

“Yeah, but you need to be a little more careful now that you’re a girl.”

Carl didn’t want to hear it. He just wanted to be here with his man, cuddling and let the world think what it wanted. He decided to change the subject. “Do you think this is what they wanted? The person who changed us?”

“I guess so. You’re a girl. I’m a guy.”

“No, but I mean us together? Like this?” Carl wanted to say a “couple”, but he wasn’t sure if they were a couple. His mind was full of feminine insecurity, and he desperately wanted them to be together, but he also didn’t want to freak Sunni out... etc...etc.... Luckily, Sunni made it clear for him.

“A couple?” She said, thinking about it. “I hadn’t thought about it. It does seem— what is their motivation? Why do this?”

“I kind of just let it go for a while, once I felt like we were stuck like this. I was just focused on figuring out how to be a girl.”

“Well, you’re nailing that,” Sunni said.

“Thanks,” Carl said, running his fingers through her beard. “And can I say you are really the most incredible boy.”

"I know," Sunni said.

"So, why do this? If anything, I am happier than ever. And, we're both still at the top of the class."

"Yeah, right? Can you imagine how much power it must take to run the splice-a-matic?"

"Huge, I would think," Sunni said, and then the idea popped, and is often the case when something finally occurs to us, it seemed so obvious. "Power. That's it."

"What?" Carl said.

"We can find the machine."

Carl caught up. "Of course," he said. "Of course."

Sunni now took his pretty little face in both her hands and kissed him. "Babe," she said. "You're incredible."

"You're amazing," Carl answered.

"Let's go," Sunni said.

"To find the machine?"

"No. Well, yes, but first we need to make an official exit from the dance. Let everyone see us."

"What? Why?"

"Because you're a girl, and we don't want you getting a reputation."

"It's so unfair..."

"Tell me about it. Now, stand still while I fix your hair."

Carl did, and then he touched up his make-up. They headed back into the dance, made their rounds, and then they snuck back down to the old Chem lab, and got on the computer. Sunni started working, hacking into the power company computer systems. "But, what about the idea that whoever did this can just make us forget we

ever figured it out?” Carl said, standing behind Sunni and watching over her shoulder as she worked.

“That, I feel, was one of our mistakes,” Sunni said. “We sent Millmore looking for the person responsible, and he— she— found them. He got changed. But, they can’t be at the machine every second of every day. And I don’t think they can monitor us every second of every day. It doesn’t seem likely that it’s a scrying device.”

“Yes,” Carl said. “Of course. Unless they somehow have a portable machine, we can find the machine and...” His voice trailed off. Carl had been about to say change ourselves back, but as the thought crossed his mind, he suddenly felt quite sad at the notion.

He was surprised by this feeling, and not surprised. The changes had been embarrassing, and he had felt angry and depressed over the loss of his friends and the experiences he’d expected to have as a boy in his last year of high school. But, well, now— he thought about being kissed by Sunni, having her take the lead when they danced... how much he loved it when she held his cheek, or when she hugged him, and he felt so small and soft and pretty...

He thought about Kennedy and the girls from the soccer team.

He thought about how amazing he felt when he walked down the hall and everyone just— stopped— because they couldn’t believe how pretty he was. And he felt sad at the notion of giving all that up, of going back to being a boy...

All those thoughts flickered through Carl’s mind in nanoseconds, a flash of emotions and memories, and then Sunni spoke:

“...change ourselves back. Exactly. Okay. Got through the first firewall, now I just need to find out where—”

“Ahem.”

Carl and Sunni froze, then looked toward the door. Mr. Ben stood there, that same bemused look on his face. "I must admit that when I saw you two sneaking down here, I was expecting you two to be up to something a little more racy."

"I was just going to order some late-night snacks," Sunni said.

"Yeah. We've got the munchies," Carl added.

"I distinctly heard you talking about hacking and getting past a firewall," Mr. Ben said. "Turn the computer off and please have good night."

"Hacking?" Sunni chuckled. "What does that word even mean?"

"Do you want me to call your parents?"

That threat was all it took for Carl and Sunni to comply. "Okay. Okay," Sunni said, shutting down the computer. Then, she took Carl's hand and led him past Mr. Ben. "Going. Good night."

"Good night," Mr. Ben said, shaking his head. "I've never seen a worse case of senioritis," he said. "You two never used to get in trouble. You two never used to get in trouble."

"It's Carli," Sunni said. "She's a very, very bad girl."

"Sunni!" Carl said.

"It's always the ones who look the most innocent."

They hurried to the parking lot and got into Sunni's car. "Do I look innocent?" Carl said, checking himself out in his phone.

"Like an angel." Sunni said.

"Oh."

"Seriously. You should have wings."

Thrilled, Carl kissed her on the cheek. It pleased him to be compared to an angel, and he loved that he looked sweet and

innocent.

“So, what now?” Carl asked.

“Now, I get you home before we break your curfew, and your parents freak out.”

“What about the hack?”

“I’ll work on it tonight,” Sunni said. “Tomorrow’s Saturday, so once we see where the power surge is happening, we can go and find the machine. Fix all this.”

“Good,” Carl said. Sunni dropped him off. He told his parents about the dance, then told his Mom about the dance in a more female-centric way. Finally, exhausted, he slipped out of his heels and carrying them in one hand, climbed the stairs to his room, plopping onto his bed still fully dressed and with his face made-up, too tired to even care. He just needed a minute to process all that had happened, the whole night had been so amazing.

It seemed likely they would find the machine. Then, he would be Carl again, the Carl he’d grown up as, the Carl he was supposed to be? Did that mean he and Sunni would be over? They’d hated each other since as long as he could remember. The thought of it being over between them made him want to cry, and he struggled against the tears. Their relationship was the most special thing he’d ever experienced in his life, and now it would just end?

It’s because I’m a girl, he told himself. Girls are always more into this kind of mushy romantic stuff. It’s probably something genetic. Once I am a guy, I am sure it will all seem a little ridiculous. I’ll be back to being TALL, and I won’t to do stupid bake sales and wear skirts and makeup and... and...

None of that seemed so bad now. None of it seemed humiliating.

Do I want to stay a girl?" He wondered. If Sunni asked me to stay Carli for her, what would I say?

No, he told himself. He couldn't. He was a boy, and he it was better to be a guy.

These high-school romances never lasted. He and Sunni would eventually break up, and did he really want to live the rest of his life as a female? What would that even look like? Would he want to have babies? And how awful would that be, getting all fat and having a baby kicking him from the inside all day long?

It bothered him that Sunni seemed so okay with changing back. She'd just been— like— yeah. We change back. Done. Just like— yeah, we change shirts. It was like Carl meant nothing to her, like THEY meant nothing, their relationship meant nothing. It made Carl feel abandoned, unloved, and was just another sign that these silly thoughts he was having about staying a girl were just a foolish teenage fantasy.

He forced himself to get up. No way he could go to sleep wearing make-up. It would be terrible for his complexion. As he wiped off his blush and foundation, he kept thinking about Sunni, kept imagining the scene. They would be standing at the machine, and she would be about to flip the switch that would turn them back to their own selves. Then, she would turn, cup Carl's face with both her hands. "Carli," she'd say. "I'm madly in love with you. Please, I am begging you, let's not change back. I think you are the most amazing girl ever, and I want to be your man."

And every time he played the scene over in his mind, he whispered, "Yes."





## CHAPTER 26

While Carl lost himself in romantic fantasies, Sunni's mind raced with what she'd seen while hacking into the power company's systems. Once she'd gotten in, she'd looked first for a power surge on campus, thinking the culprit was no doubt using school facilities to stage the attacks. But, she'd been wrong. The power consumption on campus has been roughly the same as the year before during the same time frame, and the year before that. There was no anomaly. No location that seemed to be drawing far more power than one could justify.

The multiverse manipulator, as she'd decided to name it, was not operating on campus. Now, she paced back and forth in her room, struggling with whether or not to go back and hack into the system right now, tonight, from her room. It was, of course, illegal. Were she caught, that might not go over well with the admissions committee at Harvard. On the other hand, she'd already broken the law, and if anyone were interested, they could easily identify her as the hacker once they traced it back to the old Chem lab.

Part of her was very sure she should wait until the next day, use a little more caution, log in from outside some place that had free Wi-Fi... but another part of her was now fueled with testosterone, and that part sat down at her computer and started to hack. As she began to work her way back into the system, she briefly thought of Carl. He would probably want to be here for this. Them doing it together. Ah! Female nonsense, she decided. It was better to get it done now, when their nemesis was probably asleep. She was

keeping Carl safe. She would explain it to him if he did get all female on her.

Hacking was, for Sunni, fairly boring. The process, unlike in the ridiculous movie, Hackers, didn't involve a lot of flashing lights and explosions. She also did not get any special thrill from "breaking the rules." As previously revealed, she was a bit of a goody two shoes. However, this particular hack did fill her with excitement because she was about to find the key to undo all that had been done. She would also, perhaps, unmask the villain. Perhaps, she thought, she would turn said person in a toad, or a turnip. Certainly, she would need to erase from that person's memory the ability to build the machine, or that they ever had built such a machine.

Was it ethical to meddle with someone else's memory? No. But it was necessary. And more, she felt the machine needed to be destroyed. It gave whoever controlled it too much power. Yes, Sunni was certain she would destroy the machine, and she was enjoying a quite satisfactory sense of her own moral superiority at this thought when she identified the location of a massive and inexplicable power surge that could only be the machine. "No," she whispered. "It's not possible. Please. This can't be true."

It made her feel sick. It made no sense. And yet each time she looked at the computer screen, she saw it, plain as day. Data didn't lie: the power surge was located at her house.

Sunni covered her face. It could only be her parents. They were the only ones who lived there besides her. But why? Even as she asked the question, a terrible feeling came back to her, one she'd struggled with her whole life; the feeling that her parents had always kind of wanted a boy.

Hadn't she heard her father mention, more than once, that the family name would die, as he had no son to carry it on? Hadn't her father sometimes said in a kind of off-hand way that it was too bad he didn't have a son to watch football with? Her parents had been loving, supportive. They had never expected less of her because she was a girl, never been ones to make her feel it was more important to be pretty than smart. They'd been good. But she'd always had this nagging fear, this insecurity over the idea they might have loved her more had she been their son and not their daughter.

And now she was the son they must have always wanted.

Sexism!

Sunni pulled up the floor plans to the house. She looked them over and spotted a location where she was now sure the machine was located. And then, she sat and thought. It is a testament, dear readers, to the love and devotion that she had for her parents that she now struggled with her decision. If her parents wanted a boy so badly they would go to these incredible lengths to make her one, maybe she owed it to them to be that boy. To marry, father children, carry on the family name. To be strong and tall, to watch football, grunt and fart and drink beer with her dad.

But no. Her years of women's studies kicked in. Her sense of self and identity and self-determination. She would not be a boy just because her parents had been programmed by a patriarchal culture to think boys were better. She was a girl, and she was going to do great things. Besides that, no one had a right to tamper with reality. No one had a right to change and alter people's lives. Truth was important. Truth must prevail.

She got up and crept downstairs, past her parents' closed bedroom door. She headed down to the basement. Yes. Just as she'd suspected. The basement was smaller than indicated on the floor plans. There was a large bookshelf along one wall. It was almost comical, like something out of an old movie. She started to pull books on the top shelf, books she'd once been too short to reach, one by one, until finally she pulled one called "The Master Key" and a secret door swung open. Lights immediately flickered on, filling the room with a warm, golden glow. There was a computer desk against the back wall, surrounded with a server farm, all manner of wires and gadgets and five large screens. That, no doubt, was the machine. But Sunni's eyes were also drawn to the walls, which were plastered with pictures and news clipping. She saw her own face, again and again, as a small child, a tween... and then a headline caught her eye: Local Teen Missing. There was a picture of her under the headline when she was 13 or 14, smiling, her teeth all covered in braces. Then, another. Teen Found Murdered. Another picture of her.

Sunni shook her head. *No. This never happened. I was never kidnapped, murdered.*

"I'm sorry," she heard Mom say, and turning she saw her mother standing in the doorway to the secret room. "You were never supposed to know."

"This isn't real," Sunni said. Her mother seemed, suddenly, a stranger. Someone she thought she knew, but whom she'd never known. "You and dad..."

Mom walked into the room, shaking her head sadly. "Your father doesn't know about this. I did all of this-- for you."

“For me?” Sunni looked back at the headlines. She was smart, and she’d put it all together, but even the smartest of us can struggle with denial. “This is all fake. You made this up.”

“I’m sorry. I wanted to protect you. You were kidnapped, Sunni. Beaten. Tortured. Murdered. I had to go down to the morgue and identify your body.”

“This isn’t true...”

“You were— it was so awful to see you like that. To see what he had done to my beautiful daughter. And I wish I hadn’t done it, because for a long time after that I could only remember you that way: cold and dead on a slab in a morgue.” Mom opened her arms, stepped forward.

Sunni backed away. “Stay away from.” Sunni struggled with what she’d just been told. “I died?” She said. “I’m dead?”

“I turned my grief to rage. I worked relentlessly on this— the Multi-verse Mash-up — always driven by one single desire: to erase what had happened, to create a world where you didn’t get kidnapped. To create a world in which you lived, and I had my daughter to love! To have my daughter to live her life, to go out and do amazing things!”

“Shit,” Sunni said, turning away, looking at the machine, trying to process all that she’d learned. Was it possible? Had her mother done all this to save her? To bring her back from the dead? “But then, why this?” Sunni said, gesturing down at her body.

“Because it kept happening,” Mom said, looking at the picture of Sunni as a grinning five-year-old. “It kept happening again and again. Not the same man. But— remember the day you intervened with Matt and Carli?”

“Yeah.”

“Matt attacked you in another timeline. And there was no one there to stop him.”

“Bull Shit.”

“And then there were teachers, professors, bosses... time and again, you were subjected to abuse and harassment. I got sick of it. Sick of fixing it only for it to happen again. I finally realized the only way to protect you was to make you a man. Big. Strong. That way, you would be safe.”

Sunni's head swam. She sat, put her face in her hands. Her mother stepped toward the machine. “Stop!” Sunni said, standing, blocking the machine.

“I can make you forget all this,” Mom said, her eyes glowing with a bit of crazy now. “You and Carli — you'll get married and have beautiful children. You'll be happy. She'll be happy. I have created a beautiful and perfect future for you. I know I have. Let me do this for you. All I want is for you to be safe, alive and happy.”

“What about Carl? How is this fair for him?”

“He's perfect for you as a girl. I made sure of it. He'll make a wonderful mother, a happy little housewife. I spliced it all in there. He loves being your girl. What's bad about that?”

“But that's not who he is. Not who he's supposed to be.”

“It's who he needs to be. For you.”

“It's not right,” Sunni said. “I can't let you turn Carl into my Stepford wife.”

“She loves it!”

“No.”

“Sunni, please,” Mom said. “I am your mother. I know what’s best for you.”

“Maybe I don’t want what’s best. Maybe I want what’s real.”

“This is all real. All of this happened in another world. I just curated it for you.”

“It’s wrong.”

“Do you want to be dead?” Mom said, shrugging. “Are you willing to make that choice in the name of what? Fairness? Truth? You were murdered, and how was that fair?”

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Carl woke with a start. He had an overwhelming feeling of anxiety, like he was in great danger. He turned on his bedside lamp, looking around the room, half expecting to see someone, or some shadow that would indicate there was a man in his closet, or hiding under his bed. That’s silly, he thought. I’m thinking like a child. Yet, now that the thought had entered his mind, he knew he would have to summon all his courage and look— wait. A poster on the wall opposite his bed grabbed his attention. It wasn’t his Wonder Woman movie poster. It was— some football player? Yes. Tom Brady. Back when he’d been a boy....

“Sunni!” Carl leapt from his bed, heart racing, terrified. Sunni must have discovered the machine. She was changing them back. But Carl didn’t want to change back! He didn’t want her to change back. He rushed to his laptop, popping it open, and started to hack the power company. When he got through, his head swam with confusion. What? How? It didn’t make sense. But he felt the world



tilt, and he realized he now had a flat chest. It felt so wrong. Like he was turning into a little girl again. Grabbing his keys, slipping into his slippers, he ran for the door, praying he would be able to stop Sunni before it was too late.



## CHAPTER 27

Sunni sat at the multi-verse machine. She was scanning worlds, going back through the history of all that her mother had cut and spliced, changing she and Carl back to the way they'd been, back to the reality they'd known right before the first change. Her mother had sunk to the floor, her head down, hands in her lap. "You don't know what you're doing," Mom said. "Please. I don't want to lose you."

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Carl knees banged into the steering wheel as his body returned to its previous height. He groaned. Struggling to put the seat back, he swerved without realizing into the oncoming lane. Lights in his windshield grew brighter and brighter, a horn blasted, he looked up just as his car slammed into a Tractor Trailer, the glass of his windshield splintering, and then everything went dark—

And then he was driving down the street again, as if nothing had happened. He was tall still, and the seat was now safely back, and he gripped the wheel determined to be safe, heart pounding.

\*\*\*

Sunni was talking to herself as she continued trying to fix things. She hadn't anticipated one of her changes causing Carl to die in an accident. She'd fixed it, but it made her realize that this process had a butterfly effect, where each change could cause a cascading series of unexpected changes to occur. She wondered if she could,

in a sense, use the machine to go back in time, stop the changes from happening. She glanced at her mother, but Mom was just *staring at her hands*. She would be no help.

Part of her said- wait. Learn more about the machine and how it works before you make more changes. But another part feared this machine, dreaded the possibility that as long as it existed, there was the risk her mother or someone else would use it to change her reality. The realities of millions.

Though her brain said wait, her gut said- GO! She decided to trust her gut. She continued to make the changes, reversing everything her mother had done. In what seemed like mere minutes, Sunni curled her long, silky black hair behind her ear, stood and looked down at herself. She was herself once more. Her real self. Or, the real version of herself that had not been murdered.

She looked at the computer screens. Toggled controls, careful not to change anything by accident. "How do you see the future timeline?" Sunni said. Her mother had calmed, was now just staring off with that 1000-mile stare. "How do I make sure this is right?"

"Right? Future?"

"You said that in every version of my future, I was attacked or murdered. How did you foresee that? Where's the control?"

"I didn't foresee anything, Sunni," Mom said. "I lived through them all. I lived through the murders and the attacks. I suffered through them all. And then I fixed them. I have seen you die a dozen times, had to try and console you a dozen more after you were harassed or attacked or escaping from a toxic relationship. I can't believe you want to put me through all that again, let alone yourself."

“Omigod,” Sunni said, her heart breaking for her mother. She’d never imagined that all those things had actually happened. That her mother had been forced to endure it all. And her heart broke for herself, all those versions of herself and their suffering. “Omigod.” She looked at the machine. Back to her mother. “Why? Why me?”

Mom shook her head. “I don’t know. I can’t understand it either. You didn’t deserve any of it. And yet, it just kept happening. It’s almost like it was programmed into your fate somehow. An algorithm of certain doom.”

Sunni did not want that. Maybe? Maybe Mom was right. Maybe she should use the machine to change the world, her fate. She could make women’s equality happen right now. But, it still just didn’t seem right. It seemed like the exact kind of controlling behavior she had condemned from the patriarchy. As for herself, she was strong, and she could prevent these doomed fates from happening. She wouldn’t allow herself to be a victim.

“This is the part where you tell me that you can take care of yourself,” Mom mumbled, as if lost in memory. “This is where you, poor, silly girl that you are, convince yourself you can do anything.”

“We’ve been here before? We’ve lived this before? You have.”

“I’ve lived it all before. I have. And I am telling you, you can’t stop this on your own. You have tried and tried, and every time you have failed.”

“You’re lying,” Sunni said. “I don’t—“

“Believe in the word failure?” Mom finished for her.

The fact that her mother knew what she was about to say infuriated Sunni. She did not like the idea that she wasn’t in control, wasn’t making decisions, but was simply reciting a script, a script her

mother had heard before. "Trust your gut," she told herself. "Listen to your heart." She did, and she knew what she would do next. She returned to the machine.

"And now you destroy the machine," Mom said. "And I have to live through another nightmare."

"I'm not going to destroy the machine," Sunni said. "Not yet."

"Wait," Mom said, seeming surprised for the first time. "You always destroy the machine."

"And we always end up right back here," Sunni said. "My first impulse was to destroy the machine. But now— I am going to go with my second impulse."

"What are you doing?" Mom said, struggling to her feet. "You — Mom faded away just as Carl came running down the stairs. He saw Sunni's Mom fading away like a ghost. "Sunni? What did you do?"

Sunni turned to Carl. "I erased all knowledge of this machine from her. She won't remember she ever made it, that it ever existed. She upstairs sleeping now, unaware that any of this ever happened. When I destroy this thing, that's the end."

She turned back to the machine. "Wait!" Carl said, rushing to her side, grabbing her arm as she was reaching toward the wires connecting the servers, intending to tear them out. "Stop."

"What?" Sunni said, struggling. "You know it needs to be destroyed."

"Not yet. Let's talk?" Carl let Sunni go, but he placed himself between her and the machine.

"Carl. There's nothing to talk about."

"I love you," Carl said. "I've fallen in love with you— but the other you. The man."

"That's just my mother's bullshit. She spliced all that into you so you would become my Step- ford wife."

"Then why do I still feel it?" Carl said, tears rolling down his cheeks. "Why does the thought of losing him hurt so much? Why does it make me want to die?"

"I must have missed something when I was putting you back together, but it isn't real. It never was. Carl, I saved you. She was making you into some kind of Betty Crocker fantasy woman who lived only to be a wife and mother. You can't possibly want that."

"I do," Carl said. "If it means I get to be with *him*."

"It isn't right," Sunni said. "And the machine is too powerful. In the wrong hands? We can't use it. We don't know who else will be impacted."

"But it hurts so much," Carl said. "I can't face the pain. I don't want to go back to hating you."

"We have to put everything back. No matter the cost," Sunni said. "We can't play God."

"And I won't remember any of this?"

"None," Sunni said.

"So, it's like this version of me will die? Gone? No one will even remember me?"

"I'm sorry," Sunni said. "No. But you, Carl, the version you were supposed to be, will live once more."

"Just one more hug, then?" Carl said. "Before the end?"

Sunni nodded. She felt she owed him that much. This version of Carl was about to, for all practical purposes, die. She stepped

forward, Carl put his arms around her, and then he quickly turned her, locking her in a choke hold. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can't let you do this."

Sunni struggled. She couldn't breathe. He'd cut off her oxygen. She kicked her legs and dug her nails into his arms and thrashed like a wild animal until the world went dark.





# EPILOGUE

Sonny pulled up to Carli's house in his SUV and gave the horn a tap. Carli came bopping out of the house, all smiles and blonde curls bouncing. "Hey, Babe," Sonny said, leaning over to give Carl a kiss. "How's my little love bunny today?"

"I am, like, so totally awesome! Oh, and you are so handsome! My big, strong man!" Carl gushed, grabbing his phone and answering a couple texts from his girlfriends. Sonny grunted, turning up the death metal on his sound system. As much as he loved his little Carli, sometimes her incessant chatter drove him a little crazy, so he had to drown it out sometimes.

Carl smiled to himself, glancing over at Sonny with his beard and his massive arms. Carl, for his part, thought death metal was the worst, but even the things that annoyed him about Sonny were endearing and just made him love the big lug even more. Biting his lip, he shook his head side to side, pleased with himself. Of course, he loved everything about Sonny, he thought. After all, he'd made him the perfect man, using that amazing super cool contraption that Carl had chosen to name The Perfection APP, or PerfApp, for short.

Carl's phone buzzed. He looked down. It was Sonny's Mom. "How are my little lovebirds today?"

"Best!" Carl texted back. It sure was lucky for him that Sunni's Mom had texted him as he was driving over that night. She'd told him just what to do to make sure he got to live his dream of being Sonny's girlfriend— he was perfect for Sonny, and he knew he was just going to be so happy as her wife and the mother of her children.

Once he'd knocked Sonny unconscious, he'd restored his Mom. She'd walked him through putting things back the way they were supposed to be. He really liked her. She was so cool.

Of course, they each vowed to use the machine only for the most dire emergencies, like if a giant asteroid was about to hit Earth or Sonny got a really dumb tattoo. But, well, they did have some plans for Matt. He was in for some big surprises!

As Sonny's girlfriend and helpmate, Carl knew it was his duty to let Sonny be valedictorian. He'd let Sonny think he'd won it fair and square, of course— boys were so insecure! But Carl knew his status would be dependent on his husbands' success anyway, so it was better he helped his man get ahead. It was just the way of the world. There was no point in a girl fighting it.

And, anyway, Carl, like, totally didn't even care about valedictorian anyway. He really didn't. He just wanted to be Sonny's girl, and as long as he was that, he knew he would be soooo happy.

The End

## About The Author

T.G Cooper wrote this book. T.G. lives and works on the Jersey Shore and overcame paralyzing social anxiety and [elective mutism](#) to sing and perform all over New Jersey and New York.

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# MORE BOOKS

## **Your Memory Mine (Writing as T.G. Cooper)**

As soon as Dylan laid eyes on the new girl at his high-school, he knew two things: 1) she was special and 2) he wanted to be with her. Immediately, things start to get strange. He has dreams and visions where he is her, and then he starts to like the things she likes, and think the way she thinks.

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