

TAYLOR ♂
♀ **MADE**

CHAPTER 3

Phase Transition



Taylor retreated to his bedroom and carefully removed the dress, folding it almost reverently—it was Wendy’s, after all—before placing it onto his bed. Standing in the moonlight streaming through his window, casting long shadows across the familiar clutter of textbooks and science fair trophies, he felt a desperate urge to scrub every trace of “Taylor the girl” from his skin.

First, the makeup. He scrubbed at his face with the wipes Mom had given him, watching the foundation, mascara, and lipstick smear onto the cotton pads. It felt good to reclaim his own face, even if he hated the body it was attached to. Finally, makeup-free, he pulled on his baggiest sweater. Comfort. Familiarity.

Dammit, he was still wearing the pantyhose.

He peeled them off with a grimace, the nylon clinging unpleasantly to his legs where a long day of nervous sweat had made them sticky. It was a relief to be free of their constricting grip, but the faint, slick sensation lingered on his skin. He balled them up, a silky, alien knot in his fist, and tossed them onto the growing pile of discarded femininity on his bed.

He returned to the living room where Mom was already looking up MIT’s application deadlines online. The brochure lay open on the coffee



table, its glossy pages filled with images of labs, libraries, and smiling students who almost certainly weren't pretending to be the opposite sex.

“Okay,” Taylor said, sinking back onto the couch. “Let’s look at this application.”

MIT. The dream. But the road there was suddenly paved with deceit. One semester as a girl? Could he really pull it off? And even if he could... should he?

Mom clicked through the application pages. “Look at these programs! Quantum physics, engineering, computer science—everything you’ve ever wanted.”

Taylor leaned forward, his reservations momentarily forgotten as he scanned the course descriptions. “Wow, they have a whole research center dedicated to quantum computing.”

“And look at this, they have undergraduate research opportunities starting freshman year,” Mom said, pointing at the screen. “You could actually be in a real lab.”

For a few minutes, they scrolled through the website in silence, Taylor’s mind racing with possibilities. Then they reached the application submission page.

“Wow, the application fee is \$75,” Mom read aloud.

Taylor’s stomach clenched. Seventy-five dollars. Not a fortune, but definitely not pocket change for them. A week’s worth of groceries. Half the electric bill.

“Maybe we should think about this more,” he said. “I mean, there are state schools that would be—”

“No.” Mom’s voice was firm. “Not when you’ve earned this. Not when you deserve MIT.”

Before Taylor could protest further, she reached for her purse and pulled out her worn leather wallet. The credit card she extracted (for emergencies only, almost never used) looked fragile under the living room light.

“Mom, wait—”

“Taylor Michael Hughes,” she said, her fingers poised over the keyboard. “I’ve watched you work your butt off for years. I’ve seen you stay up until two in the morning studying when other kids were out partying. I’ve seen you skip birthday parties to finish science fair projects.” She entered the card number with deliberate keystrokes.

“But what if I can’t do it?” he whispered. “What if someone finds out?”

Mom’s manicured finger hovered over the submit button. “We won’t do this if you really don’t want to. But what was your paper about again? Wasn’t it how watching something changes the outcome?”

“Yeah,” Taylor said. “The observer effect.”

“Well, I’m no scientist, but I think that’s baloney. You want to know what really changes outcomes?” Mom shifted on the couch to face him fully. “Action. Decision. Refusing to just be an observer in your own life.”

“That’s not what—”

She took Taylor’s hands and squeezed. “Honey, I’ve watched you these past four years, and do you know what I’ve *observed*? You shrinking. Every day you walk into that school and try to disappear. You hunch your shoulders, you hide in your hoodies, you make yourself smaller with every step.”

Taylor looked down. She was right, of course. But what the hell else was he supposed to do? Make himself a nice big juicy target?

“Remember when you were thirteen? Before all this—” she gestured vaguely at his chest, “—started? You were so fearless. You’d raise your hand first in class. You’d wear whatever you wanted. You’d laugh so loud sometimes that I’d have to shush you.” She shook her head. “God, I’d give anything to have to ask you to keep it down again.”

Was he ever like that? Maybe when Dad was still alive. Now the world just didn’t seem very funny anymore.

“Look,” Mom continued, “this...whole situation, it’s not just about the scholarship. It’s about you remembering that you are brilliant, and strong, even if your strength isn’t the kind those big beefy jerks understand.”

Taylor stared at the MIT brochure, the glossy images suddenly looking less like a dream and more like a terrifying experiment he was about to subject himself to, like Bruce Banner stepping into a gamma ray machine.

“So,” he said, his voice raspy. “I just... fill out the rest of this application as... her?” He gestured vaguely at the now-discarded dress and pantyhose lying in a heap on his bed, visible through the open door. The thought of ticking ‘female’ on the housing forms sent a fresh wave of nausea through him.

Mom nodded. “We use your full name, Taylor M. Hughes. We don’t lie. We just...omit.”

“And if my chest... you know... *does* go away, like the doctors said it should?” It was a faint hope, one he rarely dared to voice. “What then?”

“We blow up that bridge when we come to it,” Mom said. “Okay?”

“Okay,” he said.

She reached over and—

Wait, no, this is insane!

—clicked the ‘Submit Application’ button. The confirmation page loaded with a cheerful little chime that sounded like the opening bell of a particularly bizarre circus.

Taylor let out a long, shaky breath. It was done. Or, at least, it had begun. Eighty-three days until graduation. Then summer. Then MIT. As a girl.

“Okay,” he said again.

Monday morning after the awards ceremony, Taylor trudged through Bloomington High’s main entrance with his usual defensive posture. The heels were gone, the dress and pantyhose a disturbing, itchy memory, replaced by his usual armor: oversized hoodie (blue today), jeans, and the ever-present shoulder bag.

Cloaking device engaged.

Taylor was fumbling with his locker combination, his mind replaying Dr. Winters’ congratulatory words—“*Congratulations, Miss Hughes*”—when Alicia Reed materialized beside him.

“There you are!” She beamed. “I’ve been waiting since Saturday night to congratulate you! Did you know I don’t have your cell number? That’s so weird. Anyway, the National Scholastic Award! That’s incredible!”

Taylor blinked. “How did you—”

“Ms. Russell told us that you were nominated in AP Chem on Friday, so I kept refreshing the official website.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “She said you were presenting a paper on quantum mechanics?”

“Oh. Yeah.” Taylor shifted uncomfortably, tugging at his hoodie. The binding was holding up really well today but hurt like heck. “It



wasn't that big a deal."

"Not a big deal? Taylor, it's a hundred thousand dollars!" Alicia's hand landed on his arm as she leaned closer. "You're like, officially a genius now."

"I was already a genius," he said. "I took a test."

Alicia rolled her eyes, grinning. "True. But now everyone else knows it too." Her fingers gave his forearm a squeeze before dropping away. "So... was it scary? Standing up in front of all those important people?"

"Terrifying," Taylor said, though definitely not for the reasons she assumed.

"I bet you looked great, though." Her eyes swept over him. "I mean, I've never seen you dress up, but I bet you look great. All men look great in suits."

"Trust me, I looked ridiculous."

"I doubt that." Alicia took a small step closer, her textbooks pressed against her chest. "Listen, I was thinking... maybe we could celebrate? There's this new coffee place downtown that's supposed to be amazing."

"How can coffee be amazing?" A pack of jocks passed nearby. Taylor angled away, using his open locker as a shield. "It's hot water

and roasted beans. It tastes awful. People just like it because it's a stimulant."

Alicia giggled. "Sure, but it's all about the vibes. The ambience, you know? But, um, yeah, maybe we could go... Like, just the two of us?" Her voice dropped. "This weekend maybe?"

Where the heck was his AP Literature book? "Sure, whatever. I mean, I've got a lot of studying to do, but maybe."

Alicia's smile dimmed. "Right. Studying. Because you definitely need to worry about your grades now that you've won an enormous scholarship."

Taylor closed his locker and turned to face her. "MIT doesn't accept slackers."

"It's just coffee." Alicia's dark eyes searched his face. "An hour of your precious time to celebrate something amazing."

"Alicia—" AP Lit was all the way on the other side of the school. He had to get moving. "—what do you care?"

Her smile vanished. She took a small step back, her textbooks suddenly seeming like a shield she wished was bigger.

"I... I just thought it was cool." Her voice was quiet now. "And, you know, you're... you're my friend."

Taylor registered the shift in her tone, the way she seemed to deflate, but the connection between his words and her reaction didn't make sense. Had he said something wrong? He'd just asked a question. And he was still trying to process the fact that *anyone* at Bloomington High, apart from Ms. Russell, would even know about the award, let alone feign interest.

"Right." He hitched his bag higher on his shoulder, the strap digging in. "Well, I have to get to class."

Alicia nodded, her gaze dropping to the scuffed linoleum floor. "Yeah. Okay. See you."

She turned and walked away. Taylor watched her go, a flicker of unease in his chest, but he quickly squashed it. He had bigger, more terrifying things to worry about than Alicia Reed's sudden mood swings. Like how he was going to survive the next eighty-two days in this teenage wasteland, and then an entire semester as a girl at MIT.

Assuming I even get in! Not guaranteed.

But as he started the long march toward class, the image of Alicia's fallen face stuck with him, an unwanted pop-up ad in his mental browser.

What did I miss?

Taylor sighed internally. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered except getting through the day, then the week, then graduation. Then his whole life would really begin.

The rest of the school year passed in a blur of studying, backup



school applications, and final exams. While most of his classmates had developed a severe case of “senioritis,” Taylor was determined to keep up his grades and prove to all the bullies that his years of hard work had paid off.

As April gave way to May, Taylor’s classmates celebrated their college acceptances with Instagram posts and school sweatshirts. Meanwhile, he obsessively checked his email and the mailbox, calculating and recalculating his odds of MIT admission. Every day brought more decisions for other students, but radio silence for him. The National Scholastic Award should’ve been his golden ticket, but doubt crept in with each passing day.

What if the committee had somehow discovered his deception? What if MIT had already filled their quota of physics prodigies?

By the time the letter finally arrived, Taylor had chewed his fingernails down to painful stubs. Now it sat on the living room table, its MIT logo crisp and official. Taylor’s hands shook as he picked it up.

“It’s thin,” he whispered. “Rejection letters are thin.”

Mom hovered nearby. “Open it, honey.”

Taylor tore the envelope with surgical precision and unfolded the single page. His eyes immediately locked onto the first line: “Dear



Taylor Hughes, I am delighted to inform you..."

The world stopped. Sound ceased. His vision tunneled until those words were all he could see.

"I got in," he breathed, then louder: "I got in!"

Mom's arms were around him instantly, both of them jumping like children. "I knew it!" she cried.

Taylor read the letter three more times, confirming the scholarship details were correct. It wasn't until he reached the housing information that reality crashed back down.

"Oh," he said softly.

Mom followed his gaze. "One semester," she said. "That's all. Then you can switch back—"

"No, I know." Taylor carefully folded the letter. "It's MIT. I'd wear a clown suit for four years if that's what it took."

Mom smirked. "Let's not get crazy."

When the valedictorian announcement was made at the end-of-year assembly, Taylor's name was called. His classmates applauded, but nobody really seemed to care. Still, graduation was a day Taylor would always remember. Walking across the stage in his cap and gown, giving his speech, he felt like he could conquer the world.

Principal Richards shook his hand firmly. “Congratulations, Mr. Hughes. Bloomington High will miss that brain of yours.”

Mr. Hughes. Two simple words that suddenly felt precious. Taylor savored them as he accepted his diploma, knowing they might be the last time he’d hear that honorific for months.

From the audience, he spotted his mom standing and cheering, phone raised high to record the moment. Even Malcolm and his crew seemed subdued, perhaps finally realizing that bullying the class valedictorian hadn’t been their smartest move. As Taylor descended the stairs, Ms. Russell gave him a thumbs-up from her position among the faculty.

After the ceremony, families spilled onto the sun-drenched lawn for photos. Taylor posed awkwardly beside his mother, diploma clutched to his chest.

“Taylor!” Alicia approached with her parents in tow. “Congratulations!”

“Thanks. You too.” He shifted uncomfortably in his polyester gown. Even beneath the heavy fabric, his chest felt exposed.

Alicia hesitated. “So... MIT, right? You got in. That’s amazing.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m headed to Tufts. Pre-med.” She grinned. “We’ll both be in Boston.”

“Right. Cool.”

They stood in awkward silence until Mom rescued him. “We should get some pictures by the fountain, honey.”

As they walked away, Taylor felt a pang of something—regret, maybe? Why did every conversation with anyone who wasn’t Mom or his sister feel like he’d picked the wrong dialogue option in a video game?

The weeks following graduation brought a strange emptiness. No more papers to write, tests to study for, or bullies to avoid. Most of his classmates celebrated their newfound freedom with beach trips and graduation parties, their social media feeds a constant reminder of the teenage experience Taylor had never really had.

Instead, he spent June assembling packing lists, researching MIT’s campus layout, and obsessively checking the student portal for updates about his fall classes. During his darkest moments, usually late at night, he’d research gynecomastia treatments, scrolling through before-and-after photos of surgical corrections he couldn’t afford.

By early July, Mom had transitioned from supportive to proactive, entering what Taylor called “mission mode.”

“It’s not enough to just show up and hope for the best,” she said one morning, dropping a shopping bag on his bed. “We need a strategy.”

Inside the bag, Taylor found an assortment of t-shirts, jeans, and casual wear—all in his size, all deliberately androgynous.

“Mom, I told you I’d just wear my normal clothes.”

“These are normal!” She pulled out a pair of loose jeans. “See?”

These could be anyone's. They're just cut a little differently."

He sighed but didn't argue. The plan had its own momentum now.

The following week, Mom downloaded a voice training app to his phone to help him make his voice sound more feminine.

"That'll be your main giveaway," she said. "You did really well at the awards, but at MIT your voice has to be perfect all the time. If people *hear* a girl, they'll *see* a girl no matter what you're wearing."

Taylor tried his best, but he could only keep his 'girl voice' consistent in short bursts. "I just won't talk," he said. "I'll be a silent, brooding type. Like that girl from the Breakfast Club."

"C'mon, since when do you quit when things get tough?"

He sighed. "Okay, okay, I'll keep practicing."

Taylor worked on his voice methodically. The app showed a spectrum from blue to pink (*stupidly cliché*, Taylor thought), with his natural speaking voice firmly in the blue. Finally, after weeks of practice, he managed to hover just in the "pink" zone when he concentrated, though maintaining it through full sentences exhausted his throat. And even with all this effort, the timbre wasn't perfect, which annoyed him to no end. Hopefully it was good enough to pass.

One day, near the end of July, Mom approached Taylor while he was eating breakfast. She had a wary look in her eyes, as if she were approaching a wild animal. "I know this is a touchy subject," she began, "but if you're going to be a girl—"

His eyes narrowed. "*Pretend* to be a girl."

"—you're going to need—"

"Don't say it."

"—bras."

Taylor clutched his spoonful of Cheerios like a weapon. In the past, whenever Mom mentioned getting him "support" for his chest, he shut her down instantly. Instead, he'd used Ace bandages, even though it chafed horribly.

"I know, I know!" Mom was saying. "But you can't use your...condition...to help with the disguise *and* tape them down to within an inch of their lives. So—"

He sighed. "You're right."

Mom blinked. "I am?"

Taylor resumed eating his cereal. "Your logic tracks, unfortunately. Could you order me a few from Amazon or whatever?"

"Oh, um, it doesn't work like that. We at least have to measure you and get the right size. I'm sure you don't want to visit a department store to get fitted, but I have sewing tape. I can help—"

He crossed his arms over his chest. "No, thanks. I'll do it myself."

And so, Taylor spent an hour watching YouTube videos on how to measure yourself for a bra. The process wasn't as easy as he'd guessed. His face flushed red as he held a measuring tape against his nipples but, after checking and rechecking, he was relatively confident with the results. A few clicks on his laptop later and Taylor had successfully



ordered his first bra, sized 36C.

Two days later, the post office delivered an innocuous-looking package to their doorstep. Taylor opened it in the privacy of his bedroom and removed the garment, handling it as if it was radioactive.

The bra was a simple white piece of clothing, nothing fancy or even overly feminine. The design was utilitarian and boring.

But still a bra.

Taylor was confident in his measurements, but he knew he had to try it on. He slipped his arms through the straps of the bra. Instantly, his mind rebelled, screaming at him to stop. He was a guy! Only perverts wore women's underwear!

No, be logical. You're not wearing this for a thrill, but for practical reasons.

When he fastened the back, the cups settled perfectly around his breasts. The support felt...strange, but not unpleasant. He felt a moment of triumph for having gotten the sizing correct. Then, he frowned down at his new cleavage.

For years, his chest had been an adversary—something to hide, to bind, to be ashamed of. Now, properly supported, the constant ache in his shoulders and back suddenly eased.

“Huh,” he murmured, running a finger along the underwire. So this was why women bothered with these contraptions.

He twisted to see his profile in the mirror. The bra created a definite shape to his chest. Not the flattened, compressed mass he was used to, but actual, defined breasts.

“This is crazy. What the hell am I doing?” He sat on his bed and stared into space. Suddenly, he stood up and took a deep breath. “It’s too late. I’m going to MIT. There’s no turning back.”

Turning to his mirror again, Taylor put on a fake smile, cocked his hip, and ‘switched on’ his girl voice. “Hi! I’m Taylor. What’s your name?”

* * *

Finally, the day arrived. Taylor was leaving for MIT! First, though, Mom insisted on helping him apply “a touch” of makeup.

“You have to practice,” she insisted. “You’ve mastered the voice, you’re wearing a bra—”

“Don’t remind me.” He still hadn’t gotten used to the straps digging into his shoulders all day.

“—but you’ve been so resistant about basic makeup.”

“Lots of girls don’t wear makeup. Even Wendy barely does.”

“I know, Taylor. And you don’t need to go full glam, but if you don’t wear at least a little concealer you’ll always be seen as a little...off by the other girls. You don’t need that kind of scrutiny.”

Her logic was sound, but that didn’t mean Taylor was happy about it. In fact, he was downright miserable. *One semester*, he reminded himself. *That’s all.*

He spent the whole morning following Mom’s instructions to the letter. As it turned out, she was a great teacher, and once she explained the purpose of all the weird tubes, wands, and palettes, it wasn’t as complicated as he feared. In the end, he looked...normal.

Well, normal for a girl, anyway.

“This is still so weird,” he said to his lipstick and mascara-clad reflection.

“You’ll get used to it,” Mom said from behind him. “We all do.”

“We?”

“Women,” she said with a smile. “It’s a club you’re now a part of, at least for a little while. And I think you’ll find that it has its perks.”

“Like what?”

“What is it you always say? ‘No spoilers?’ It’ll be better if you find out for yourself. You really do look pretty, though.” Mom beamed with pride. “I know that’s not what you want to hear, but it’s true. And I’m so glad I convinced you to let your hair grow out over the summer. It’ll help with the disguise.”

Taylor shook his head, still not quite believing this was happening. “We’re really sure this is going to work?”



“Of course,” Mom said. “You just need to be confident.”

“Do you remember who you’re talking to?”

“Yep, I’m talking to my wonderful, brilliant, and beautiful son. Now, go get your luggage. Your plane leaves in three hours.”

* * *

Mom drove him to Indianapolis International and gave him a big hug right before the security line.

“I’ll miss you so much,” she said. “Without you and Wendy to keep me company, the house will be way too quiet.”

Taylor fought back tears. This might be his last chance to act like a man until winter break. “I’ll miss you too, Mom. And don’t worry, I’ll call you all the time.”

“You’d better.” She wiped her eyes. “Remember, you deserve to be there. And nobody will suspect a thing unless you give them a good reason. People see what they expect to see.”

“But what if I mess up?” Taylor said, suddenly terrified. “What if I can’t do this? What if—”

“Hey, look at me.” Mom placed her hands on his shoulders. “You’re



going to be fine. Do you remember what I said about mistakes? *Please make some. Don't try to be perfect. Not for me, not for anyone.*"

The final boarding call echoed through the terminal. Taylor wrapped his arms around his mother one last time, inhaling her familiar scent of vanilla and coffee.

"I love you," he said. "Even though your ideas are completely insane."

"I love you too. And it's not insane if it works." She straightened his shirt and wiped a smudge of mascara from under his eye. "Call me when you land."

Taylor nodded, suddenly unable to speak past the lump in his throat. With one final wave, he turned and walked toward the security line. As he handed his ID to the TSA agent, he held his breath—but the agent barely glanced at it before waving him through.

"Have a good flight, miss."

First test: passed. Taylor exhaled slowly, hefted his carry-on, and continued into the terminal.

He was really doing it. He was going to college. As a girl.
Well, here goes everything.