

BEACHHEAD

Story by The Professor
Illustrated by The Might Fenek

BOOK ONE – COMING HOME



TG Stories



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BOOK ONE

You really can't go home again.

Yeah, I know. It's not an original idea. It probably wasn't an original idea when Thomas Wolfe used something similar for the title of his book three quarters of a century ago, but it was the thought that kept running through my head as the four-lane highway I had been cruising down suddenly became two lanes of cracked concrete nearly thirty miles from my destination.

I hadn't been down this particular road in nearly a year, and then, I'd had been headed in the other direction – toward Chicago. You might say I had been moving from my past to my future. Heading toward Chicago, I had been about to enter my junior year as a history major at the University of Chicago. Already a recognized upcoming star at one of the five top history programs in the nation, my future looked very, very bright. I had already been selected for a trip to Germany after my junior year as an assistant to my faculty advisor – an honor many grad students would have jumped at. I was being mentored by one of the top published historians in the world, and was proving my parents wrong when they had predicted that my love of history would only lead me to teaching in some Podunk high school (sort of like the one I went to as a kid).

Speaking of Podunk, I suppose I was on my way there now. Hawthorne City, Missouri, was my destination – a dull, out-of-touch town fitting the very definition of a Podunk town. I had been born and raised there, determined to leave it as soon as I was old enough. Hawthorne City was way too small a town for a big fish like Andrew Stone – me.

I sighed to myself as I drove past endless farms with rundown barns and deserted houses. It seemed as if the countryside was emptier each time I came back to visit my parents. Big farms gobbled up little farms – a testament to agricultural efficiency – but it meant the slow death of small farm town like Hawthorne City, that continually lost population to nearby cities, like Kansas City. How people could stand to live there always amazed me, but I suppose it was all they knew. Dad had grown up in Hawthorne City and just stayed after earning a degree in Public Administration at a small state college not far from home. Mom had been a native of Hawthorne City, too, taking a job in a real estate office as a secretary right after she finished two years at Dad's college. She had worked her way up to being a real estate agent by the time she and dad were married.

The music I was playing through my I-pod seemed a little to with-it for the placid scenery. I

was close enough to home to pick up Hawthorne City's only radio station – an underpowered folksy little station that played oldies – real, real oldies – along with local news and farm reports. Maybe listening to it would prepare me for the culture shock I was about to experience.

"It's a scorcher today," the announcer was saying with a bit of a drawl. "We're at ninety now and will probably tack on a couple more degrees before the day is over."

Great, I thought with a silent groan. It could get damned hot in Chicago, too, particularly in August. I had about died a couple of days earlier when I got off the flight from Berlin. But usually, there's a little breeze off the lake in Chicago. Not so in Hawthorne City. There's just heat and humidity every day in August until fall.

"Don't forget the welcome party at Berkshire Park tonight for the management team for Arcastle Industries. The fun starts at six, with lots of prizes and plenty to eat and drink. The guys from Arcastle will have employment applications for you, too, so if you're looking for a job – or a better job – come out tonight and join the fun!"

As another oldie started up – something by somebody named Connie Francis – I wondered who the hell Arcastle Industries was. I knew every business in town worth knowing. Like all small towns, Hawthorne City was always trying to attract new businesses. For the most part, they failed. Small towns lacked the clout to lure new industries, which preferred cities with larger labor forces, or foreign locations with cheaper labor. But every now and then, a small community would get lucky. Could it be they finally snagged one?

Apparently, they had. As I drove through the northern outskirts of Hawthorne City, I saw an impressively large building under construction. It had the appearance of a manufacturing facility, probably large enough to employ a couple of hundred workers on a shift. Given the town's population was just shy of nine thousand people, that was an impressive gain for the community.

I hadn't been in town for nearly a year, since my work for Professor Schmidt had meant staying in Chicago during school breaks, preparing for our trip to Europe, which we had just completed. My parents and my younger brother had made the trek to Chicago for Christmas, so I hadn't realized how much my hometown had changed. In addition to the new plant under construction, a regular housing development was rising out of a corn field, and the businesses along the highway leading into town were being fixed up. There were even a few new businesses that looked as if they had recently opened – like a McDonald's no less. For a small town, getting a McDonald's was a big deal. Now the folks in Hawthorne City could eat just as badly as their big city cousins.

More surprises awaited me as I got further into the core of the town. To get to my parents'

home, I had to drive through the heart of the business district. Most of the formerly-closed stores now had new tenants, and the three-story century-old court house that stood in the center of the downtown square was being cleaned, its granite walls looking practically new. Was all this the result of Arcastle Industries' move to town? I wondered. Was it really bringing prosperity to Hawthorne City? Maybe miracles really did happen, I mused.

There seemed to be a lot of activity on Douglas – the main business street of town. Where had the sleepy, dying farm town I grew up in gone to, anyway? Everyone seemed to have a purpose. Pedestrian greetings looked to be short and inconsequential, as if everyone had something else to do or someplace else to go, I noted from my vantage point stopped at the stoplight at Douglas and Sixteenth Street. What was that all about? Then I noticed many of the pedestrians taking quick, furtive glances at a car stopped at the light across the intersection from me. It was a blue and white car with a rack of lights on top, causing me to think the police must have updated their color scheme from the drab gray vehicles they had used in the past. But I could see on the side of the car the emblazoned black letters nearly each a foot-high spelling out "Department of Public Safety", and nothing else.

I wondered if this was a new name for the police, but then I spotted a gray car with "Hawthorne City Police" in black letters driving slowly through the green light of the intersection. So who was the Department of Public Safety? I'd have to remember to ask Dad about it; he worked for the city and would know.

The light turned green and I started through the intersection, still looking at the Public Safety cruiser. I caught a glimpse of the driver, looking back at me. The driver had close cropped brown hair and a surly expression on his face. "Holy shit!" I muttered to myself. It was Butch Schumacher, one of my old classmates. The last person in the world I ever expected to see driving around in an official-looking vehicle was Butch Schumacher. In high school, he could have been voted the boy most likely to end up in prison. A bully starting in elementary school, he had honed his craft until by high school, he had a reputation all over the county. We had both been on the high school football team, but he had been kicked off our junior year after he took a cheap shot during a game that nearly killed a Cameron player during our annual grudge match. Then he had nearly been sent to reform school for kicking the crap out of a younger boy that he suspected of horning in on his girl a year later. The girl left town after graduation, and the rumor was she did it to get away from Butch.

What idiot would hire Butch Schumacher in a position of responsibility?

That question started me thinking about my recent trip to Germany. Professor Schmidt had taken us along to help him gather information for his new book. He was writing a text on how the Nazi Party managed to keep order in small German communities during their time in power. Often, the party would hire toughs from these smaller towns and give them power over everyone in the name of the Nazi Party. Even elected local officials had to tow the mark

when the party thugs got involved.

An odd thought, I told myself. This was America – not Nazi Germany. Things like that didn't – couldn't – happen here.

I pulled up in front of my parents' home, a little relieved to see nothing had changed there. We lived in an upper middle-class neighborhood with lots of trees and expansive lawns. It looked like an updated neighborhood from *Leave It to Beaver*. Well, my parents did well by small town standards. Dad headed up the city's water and sanitation department, and Mom was in real estate sales, working for Brian Langford. Brian had the largest real estate firm in the county, and the fact that he was also the town's mayor made Mom's job a little easier. Of course, she had been selling real estate for twenty years. She knew everyone in town and was even president of the PTA, so if someone wanted to sell a home anywhere near Hawthorne City, Mom was the go-to person. Through the years, she and made a lot of money for Brian Langford – and quite a bit for herself as well. I wasn't certain, but I suspected she made more than Dad.

I think my family must have been waiting at the windows for me to arrive, for the minute I got out of my car, all of them were rushing out to greet me. Trevor, my younger brother, was first. Six years my junior, we had always been surprisingly close. He honestly looked like a younger version of me – chestnut hair, fair skin, blue eyes and an average build, he was obviously closing in on my six-foot height, perhaps only two inches shorter than me now.

He grinned as I got out of the car. "Hey, Bro. Good to see you."

"You, too," I said as we gave each other a manly hug.

"Oh, Andrew!" my mother nearly cried, tag-teaming Trevor to give me a hug so fierce it was as if I had just been rescued from certain death. Mom could hug hard. She was an attractive woman who looked nowhere near her forty-four years. Her hair was the same color as mine, and without a hint of gray, which, as far as I know, got no help from her hairdresser. She was dressed casually in a t-shirt and shorts, meaning she probably hadn't been out showing houses all day. Otherwise, she would have been in a feminine business suit – her trademark uniform as the top sales person for Langford Realty.

"Easy, mom," I laughed returning her hug. "You'll break a rib."

She released me reluctantly, allowing my dad to reach in and give me a fatherly handshake. "Welcome home, son," he said. He was dressed in khakis and a navy-blue polo shirt with "Hawthorne City Public Works" emblazoned in white over the spot where a pocket would usually be. That meant Dad had been working today. I noticed his hairline had receded a little since I had seen him last, but it made him look more as if he had a high forehead instead of

progressive balding.

We hustled all of my luggage into the house. There wasn't much, really. I'd only be staying for a few days before heading back to Chicago. Fall semester at the University of Chicago would be starting soon. While Trevor brought in the last of my stuff, Mom led me into the kitchen where I expected to find her fixing my favorite dishes, as she usually did when I came home. I was a little disappointed, though, to find out nothing was being prepared. The kitchen was spotless and unused.

"Would you like a drink of water?" Mom asked. Already pulling out a glass.

"The finest water in Missouri!" Dad declared with a grin as he patted down his graying hair so it looked like he wasn't thinning on top.

"No thanks," I said, pulling a water bottle out of my pocket. "I need to finish this first. To demonstrate, I opened it and swigged at least a third of the mostly-full bottle. My parents looked strangely disappointed.

"I'm glad you got in early," Dad told me. "That way, we can get to the party early."

I frowned. "What party?"

"Oh, we're all going over to Berkshire Park for the big barbeque welcoming Arcastle Industries," Mom informed me.



I tried to hide my disappointment. I had wanted to stay home and relax – maybe call Russ Wheaton, my best friend. He was supposed to be coming into town to visit his family, too. He had called me a couple of days earlier to say he'd be in Wednesday evening – a day before me – but I hadn't been able to reach him since. Something must have been wrong with his phone, because when I had tried to call him earlier in the day, I got a message saying that his number was invalid. Probably a glitch with his phone, I reasoned.

Apparently I didn't hide my disappointment very well. "Oh, come on," Mom chided me. "It will be fun. Just get on a fresh shirt and we'll go. You'll see a lot of your old friends there."

I doubted that. Most of my friends had moved away. Hawthorne City didn't offer much in the way of opportunities for young adults. The few people I knew who had stayed behind hadn't been close friends of mine. Some – like Butch Schumacher – were not exactly people I wanted to renew an association with.

"She won't take no for an answer," Trevor laughed as he walked into the kitchen. "This is a big deal in Hawthorne City."

"So how did Hawthorne City manage to land a new industry?" I asked.

I was answered with a moment of silence. No one seemed ready to answer the question right away. At last, my father ventured, "Well, Andrew, there have been some changes here over the last year..."

He didn't get a chance to elaborate on those changes, because my mother broke in, "Brian's been doing a great job as mayor. He and the consultants he hired have contacted a lot of businesses. I think Arcastle Industries will just be the first of many businesses he brings to town."

She was practically gushing over Brian Langford's success. Of course, she did work with him. Dad seemed almost embarrassed at her praise for Brian.

"So what does this Arcastle Industries do?" I wanted to know.

Mom shrugged. "I don't really understand it. They make some sort of computer devices, I guess. I really don't understand that sort of thing."

"They make high-end modems," Trevor laughed. "Not the stuff you buy at Best Buy – I'm talking industrial-strength modems."

"I thought those were all made overseas," I ventured.

Trevor shook his head. "Not like these. I guess we're talking the kind of stuff Fortune 500 companies use for security. There's even rumors the NSA is a customer."

Well, I thought to myself, I supposed that would explain why they were made here instead of China, or someplace else in Asia. That still didn't explain why they were so interested in Hawthorne City. Brian and his consultants must have cut them one hell of a deal.

Let me explain why I was curious. As I've already related, I had just spent several weeks in Europe researching for one of my professors. What I didn't mention was that we were studying the records of smaller German towns – Kleinstadts in German – to determine their economic development over the last century. The professor had theorized that many small German towns were intimidated as much by economic factors as they were by Nazi toughs. Yeah, I know. This was not the most exciting of subjects to study, but it had heightened my interest in how towns develop. Given my small-town background, I had found it interesting how small communities in Europe faced many of the same problems as US towns.

So I wasn't entirely uninterested in attending the barbeque. Still, I was tired, and I had been

looking forward to a little down time. So with only minor reluctance, I shaved – delaying a shower until later – and changed into a fresh University of Chicago t-shirt and a reasonably clean pair of khaki shorts.

Berkshire Park was the largest park in town, but that wasn't saying much. Still it was large enough that I had never seen it full to overflowing – that is, until that afternoon. We had to park about a hundred yards away from the party – almost to the entrance of the park, and my father said we were early! As we got out of the car, I could hear a band playing oldies. They weren't very good, but what they lacked in talent, they made up for it with volume. I knew this Arcastle thing was a big deal for the town, but I was surprised to see so many people buying into it. Maybe it was just the free food.

"We have to sign in first," Dad told me us.

"Sign in?" I echoed. "Why?"

Dad shrugged. "Just a formality," he replied – a little nervously, I thought. Still, the rest of the family followed him to a table where a small line had formed. At the table, two women were checking people into the event. Everyone in line was holding a white plastic card, which the two women swiped efficiently through a portable card reader, smiling as they returned each one.

Ominously, two men stood behind them. Each wore the same dark gray uniform shirt I had seen on Butch Schumacher. Their white nametags showed a last name with "Public Safety" at the top. Neither had a gun, but visible against their gray uniform trousers each sported a black police baton.

"What's with those guys?" I asked my father.

"Not now!" he snapped, presenting his card. Then, to one of the women, he declared, "This is my son, Andrew. He hasn't been processed yet."

Processed?

The woman frowned, looking at me as if I was an illegal alien. "I don't know if I can let him in then..."

"Of course you can!" a familiar voice called out cheerfully from behind me. I turned to see Brian Langford standing behind me. He had a broad smile on his youthful face. I had always thought he was wasting his time as a small-town mayor. With his piercing eyes and strong jaw, he should have been in higher political office, but I guess his real estate business required too much of his attention to run. In his yellow polo shirt and pressed khakis, and dark well-

trimmed hair without a trace of gray, no one just meeting him would have believed he was nearing fifty.

"Let him in on my say-so," he ordered.

The woman glanced back to see if either of the Public Safety apes were going to say anything. One of them, I noticed, gave her a subtle nod, so with a shrug, she wrote out an adhesive name tag and handed it to me. I pasted it onto my t-shirt.

"Thanks," I told him. "What all this stuff about being processed?"

Brian laughed. "Sounds ominous, doesn't it?" He pulled an identical plastic card out of his wallet and handed to me. It had his picture – complete with his trademark smile – and basic name, address, sex and birth date on it. It also had his occupation listed as "Realtor." There were five additional numbers/letters after the profession. It looked sort of like a driver's license, with the town's seal faintly visible in the background. "It's really just a way for us to determine who's entitled to city services," he explained. "This card gets you into the library, allows you to reserve tables for picnics at town parks, and lets you into events like this. Once you're in, all the food and drinks are free."

"Sounds great," I said, not really meaning it. It sounded like a waste of money to me. Why not just look at the address on the driver's license?

"We'll get you one in the morning," he went on. "Come by the processing center about ten and I'll get you taken care of."

"Well, I don't really think I'll need one," I protested. "I'm only going to be here for a few days..."

He shrugged. "No matter. Let's get you one anyway. With your dad a high-ranking city employee it wouldn't look right for you not to have one, would it?"

I thought he was overstating the case a bit, but the message was clear. Everyone had to be processed and get a card or risk disfavor with the man who, in effect, employed both of my parents. "Okay," I agreed at last.

He gave me a friendly pat on the back. "That's great. I'll see you at ten." With that, he rushed off to shake a few hands and make his presence known.

The woman reluctantly stamped the back of my hand under the watchful eye of the two Public Safety goons. Name tag and a hand stamp? I couldn't help but think this was really overkill just to make sure no one from out of town crashed the party. But I quickly forgot

about it as my family rushed me in as soon as my hand was stamped.

"What the hell is going on here?" I asked my parents when we were away from the reception table.

"Not now," my mother said softly. "We'll talk about it at home."

I didn't press matters, not wanting to create a problem, but when we got home, I was going to want some answers.

I stuck pretty close to my family most of the evening, only ducking into a more quiet corner a couple of times to try to reach Russ Wheaton. I couldn't figure out why I hadn't been able to reach him. He had expected to be back in Hawthorne City before I got there. Or at least I presumed he had come back. We had talked and e-mailed each other over the last couple of weeks to make sure we were both in town at the same time. Like me, he had gotten out of town before the ink on his high school diploma was dry. While my talents were more in the social studies, Russ was a science whiz, off to Cal Tech for a promising career in science so advanced I was at something of a loss to even describe it. All I knew was that when I asked him what one studied in things like quantum physics, he would just laugh and tell me, "Think of it as something like magic." Little was I to know then how close to being right that was.

As I said, I had been trying to reach Russ all day. He had been expected to get into Hawthorne City the day before I arrived, but every time I tried to call him, I still got the "this number is not in service" message. That was still the case as I tried to call from the park. There had to be something wrong with his phone. Well, no matter, I thought. I'd drop by his parents' house later in the evening.

"Having fun?" my mother asked me as I came back from my latest attempt to call Russ.

"Sure," I replied, trying to act like I really meant it. In fact, the barbeque was excellent. It was catered by Dale's Best Bar-be-que – a local restaurant that everyone in the surrounding counties thought held up favorably against Jack Stack or Joe's in Kansas City. I had to agree; it was as advertised. I did, however, miss having a beer with it. This was my first opportunity to drink legally in town, plus I had gotten used to drinking beer as a casual beverage in Germany. Unfortunately, no beer was available, so I had to settle for cans of soda pop. It was probably just as well, though. I was still tired from the drive, and a couple of beers would have probably put me to sleep.

Speaking of being put to sleep, though, the rest of the party was a crushing bore. Trevor had wandered off to be with some of his friends. I would have probably done the same, except most of my good friends from high school had left town when I did. My classmates who had remained had very little in common with me anymore. They were too busy trying to earn a

living or starting families – or most likely, both. So I was stuck with my parents, being reintroduced to their friends who I hadn't seen in several years. Of course, they all commented on how much I had grown and politely asked me how college life was in the big city. Truthfully, I doubt if any of them really wanted to know, and I made a point not to bore them or insult them with long-winded replies.

About eight, the sun was almost down, and thankfully, we headed back to the car to go home. I had given up on the idea of seeing Russ that evening. It would wait until tomorrow. I just wanted to get back to the house and get a shower and about ten hours of sleep.

Had I been less tired, I might have noticed some things that I only thought about later. For one thing, those Public Safety guys seemed to be everywhere at the party. I never saw a regular police officer all evening – except the one directing traffic as everyone left. Everyone seemed to shy away from them, as if they were afraid of them. Given my studies of German towns, it was almost a reminder of the way things were there in the days of the Brown Shirts and later the Gestapo. Under the Nazi rule, the police still existed and carried on their usual functions, but the party goons were really in charge.

Don't get me wrong – no one seemed overtly afraid of the Public Safety boys, but I had to wonder what exactly their function was, and why they needed people like Butch Schumacher.

When we got home, I was exhausted. I hadn't even unpacked my suitcase, and all I could think of doing was throwing myself in bed, clothes and all. My parents and brother seemed full of energy, though, but of course they hadn't driven in from Chicago that day.

"That was fun, wasn't it?" my mother commented, sounding like the mom in one of those old sitcoms that always seemed to be on the cable channels.

"It was," my father agreed, adding to the sitcom analogy.

"Did you have fun, Trevor?" my mother asked my brother. I almost expected a Wally-ish response from him, but instead, he just shrugged and mumbled, "It was okay."

"So was Tanya there?" Mom teased.

"Don't mention Tanya!" he snapped.

Uh-oh, I thought. Trevor's having girl problems. Well, it was about time. When I had left for college last fall, Trevor was just starting his freshman year in high school. That was about the time I started having girl problems. It was a shame that Trevor wasn't closer to my age. He was

my brother and I loved him, but there was a six-year age difference between us. Trevor was the younger of my siblings. A sister, Amanda, had been half way in between us in age, but she had died in infancy. I barely remembered her. If she had lived, she might have formed a bridge between Trevor and me, but since she hadn't lived, it was just Trevor and me.

"Hey, buddy," my dad said slapping me on the back, "how about if I take you in to see the mayor in the morning? I don't have to be in until late Friday since they have me working Saturday morning."

Damn. I had forgotten all about the mayor's invitation. I'd have to come up with an excuse to not go. "Look, Dad," I began, "I'm not going to be in town that long. I don't really need that ID."

"Sure you do," Dad insisted. "Everybody has one." As if to prove a point, he pulled his own ID out of his pocket and held it in front of my face. "It will just take a little while, and then you'll be able to go to the library, the pool, tennis courts, you name it!"

I didn't like tennis, and the University of Chicago had a library that made Hawthorne City's look like an airport book kiosk, but if I was going to be in town for a few days, I might want to use the pool. "Okay, Dad," I sighed. "I'll go, but I'll drive myself."

"Nonsense," Dad replied. "Your car probably hasn't been serviced for a long time." He was right about that. "I'll take it in tomorrow morning and get it looked at – oil change, car washed, the works."

I was too tired to argue. Besides, my car probably needed it. It would have to last me until I graduated, so why not?

Dad grinned. "Great! Brian said he arrange for someone to take you back home."

I just grunted in response, stripping off my t-shirt as I made for my room. What was this obsession about getting an ID anyway?

I tried calling Russ again, but I got the same "not in service" message. I kicked around going by Russ's house to tell him there was something wrong with his phone, but tomorrow was Friday – still a working day – and Russ's parents probably wouldn't appreciate me dropping by so late. What the hell. I'd go by tomorrow after I got my precious ID.

I wondered, though, why Russ hadn't made some effort to reach me. Even if his phone was broken, he could have used one of his parent's phones. Or could he? Come to think of it, nobody really knew anyone else's phone number anymore. It was all loaded into memory. If my phone broke, I be hard pressed to find someone's number without a little effort.



I climbed into the shower, happy to get the road dust off my body. The water felt good – better than usual, in fact. It almost tingled as it ran off my skin. I guessed I could thank my dad for that, since he was in charge of the town’s water department. Reluctantly, I got out of the shower and brushed my teeth. Funny, when I did, the inside of my mouth tingled. Must be the toothpaste, I thought.

I put on fresh skivvies and was ready for bed when I decided to go down to the kitchen and get a glass of ice water. The tingle was still in my mouth, and I decided a couple of glasses of water would wash it out. No such luck, though. If anything, the ice water made my mouth tingle more. I shrugged. It wasn’t an unpleasant sensation, so I decided to ignore it and head back to my room.

I noticed Trevor’s light could still be seen from under his door and decided to pop in on him. If he was having girl trouble as I suspected, I figured I should take an unusual turn of playing the

sympathetic big brother. I tapped on his door.

"What, Mom?"

His voice was peevish. I opened the door. "Not Mom," I told him.

"Oh, sorry, Andrew," he apologized from the bed, reaching under his pillow to retrieve a girly magazine he had quickly stuffed there anticipating our mother.

"So she's still making those nightly bed checks to make sure we don't have any porn hidden in the room," I observed with a smile.

He shook his head. "She never changes. I remember a couple of times when she caught you."

"Yeah," I grinned, sitting in the chair at his desk. "And a couple of other times, she found my stash of mags in the closet. Why don't you just watch on line? That's what I started doing."

"Too many viruses on the porn sites," he explained. "You always had Russ who could remove the viruses for you. I haven't got anybody that nerdy to help me."

"Russ isn't a nerd," I shot back, irritated. "He was on the football team with me. He's just good at that kind of stuff."

"Whatever," Trevor sighed.

"So... you having girl problems?"

"Not really. Tanya was just pissed at me because I forgot my ID when I tried to take her to the movies last night."

I was puzzled. "What was the problem? You look more than thirteen." I was assuming they were trying to go to a PG-13 film, since I doubted if Trevor could have passed for 17 to get into a restricted film. Yeah, I know. In big cities, it doesn't matter. Buy a ticket for a PG rated film and duck into another auditorium. But in Hawthorne City, the theater had one – count 'em, one screen for your viewing enjoyment.

"Things have changed around here," Trevor said slowly. "They take this ID shit seriously. No ID means no movie. In fact, if you're in town more than three days, no ID constitutes a misdemeanor."

"Get serious!" I laughed.

He didn't laugh back. "I am serious. Remember that e-mail you sent me from Germany, about how you were researching everyday life in German towns during the Second World War?"

I nodded.

"It's sort of like that here now. You have to have your ID with you at all time. In school, they teach us how to behave. If you don't behave, there are punishments. On the street, the Dips rule..."

"Dips?"

"The Department of Public Safety."

An image of Butch Schumacher in his uniform came to mind. An even worse image came to my mind as well – the Allgemeine-SS, which was the branch of the Nazi SS that policed towns, overriding and often overseeing local police forces. Neither image was pleasant.

"You've got to be exaggerating," I argued uncomfortably. "Someone would have complained to the state government, or even the FBI if something that repressive was going on."

Trevor shook his head sadly. "Nobody complains. You'll see." He looked me in the eye. "If you know what's best for you, you'll leave in the morning. Leave – and don't come back."

I didn't know what to think. Was Trevor just being overly dramatic, or was he mentally delusional? All teens find adult controls oppressive, I'm sure. I know I had. That was one of the reasons I got away from home as soon as I could. Sure, I found this Department of Public Safety crap a little over the top, but from what I had seen as the party that night, Hawthorne City was just a typical happy small town. This obsession with ID's was probably just somebody's bright idea that would go away as quickly as it had arrived.

"You seem awfully anxious to get rid of me!" I laughed.

Trevor didn't laugh with me. "I mean it, Andrew. Pack up tonight and be gone before our folks get up in the morning." He was nearly in tears.

So okay, now I was getting a little shaken up. My laughter stopped. "So okay, what aren't you telling me?"

I could see the frustration in his eyes. "That's all I can say. I've probably said too much already. Now go!"

I did. I went back to my room, wondering what could have my brother so upset. I found I was

honestly considering his advice. Although I still thought he was exaggerating, maybe leaving wasn't a bad idea. I still hadn't hooked up with Russ, but I was starting to think that wasn't so urgent. Maybe I could head down to Kansas City for a couple of days, contact Russ, then head back to Chicago early. It was worth setting the alarm on my phone, just in case. I set it for five, knowing my parents were usually up about six thirty.

I didn't have much to pack, so if I didn't take a shower in the morning, I could be gone by five-thirty and in Kansas City in about an hour. Then, I could call my parents and tell them some bullshit story about needing to go to Kansas City to see someone for Professor Schmidt. I'd contact Russ and sort out what the hell was going on in Hawthorne City. Nothing, I suspected, but why take a chance?

I was very conflicted as I went to bed that night. It should have been a restful night, sleeping in the bed I had grown up with for the first time in a year, but I was too restless for proper sleep. Part of my mind was still convinced that nothing was really going on. It was all my imagination. I had spent the last few months studying German towns, including the draconian rule of the Nazis before and during the Second World War. Was I seeing the Gestapo in the Department of Public Safety? Did the required ID smack of the papers everyone had to have just to go through daily life in the thirties and forties? Or was my brother overreacting to an innocent if misguided program instituted by the town government?



"Probably just that," a soothing gender-neutral voice told me.

No, the voice wasn't in my head. It was coming from... somewhere else.

I was asleep, I told myself. I was just having a fitful dream. No one was in the room with me.

"In fact," the voice continued, "it may not be misguided at all."

"What do you mean?" Had I actually spoken? It didn't seem so. Conversations in dreams are often more like thoughts passing back and forth. My own question seemed to be just that.

The voice, though, sounded real. It was clear, mellow, and quite convincing looking back on it. "This is a chance for your society to prosper," the voice went on. "Imagine your town strong and vibrant. Imagine it growing, becoming more influential. Imagine all of its citizens healthy and prosperous. Would that be bad?"

"Bad? Not necessarily," I countered. "But what would the price be?"

"Oh yes," the voice agreed. "There would have to be a price, wouldn't there? What would the proper price be for peace, security and prosperity? Is there really a cost too high?"

As a history major, I knew that question had been posed by many philosophers throughout history. Unfortunately, it had also been posed by many would-be dictators as well. For those who answered that there was no cost too high, the price often became their freedom. I tried to answer exactly that, but I was somehow frozen from speaking (if, in fact, speaking was what I was really doing).

The debate faded into nothingness as I drifted away into deeper sleep.

I was awakened by my mother's voice. "Time to get up," she sang. I opened my eyes to bright sunlight, my memories of the last night rushing to my conscious mind. What had happened to my alarm? I had set it for five, hadn't I? I looked over at the nightstand, but my phone wasn't there.

"I charged your phone up for you," my mother explained, knowing at once what I was looking for. "I was afraid the battery would run out during the night."

My phone had registered a 70% charge when I had gone to bed, and I knew it had plenty of power, but never underestimate the power of a mother trying to be helpful. I had missed my opportunity to get up early and sneak out.

"Wear a nice shirt," she told me. "They'll be taking your ID picture and you'll want to look nice."

I honestly didn't care if I looked nice or not, but I hauled myself out of bed and grabbed a polo shirt out of the closet as my mother dutifully watched. I might as well do what she said, I thought. "Do I have time for a shower?" I asked.

"I imagine so," she replied. "Your father is taking one now."

So I showered and dressed quickly in a preppy polo shirt and khaki shorts, taking a moment to mull over my odd dream the night before. It hadn't really seemed like a dream; it was more as if I was having a conversation with myself straight out of Plato's Republic. I had been back in Hawthorne City for less than a full day, and I had been inundated with strange behaviors, dire warnings, and fitful dreams. The sooner I got out of there the better.

My cell phone back in my possession, I tried one more time to get in touch with Russ. But I got the same recorded message. I vowed to go over to Russ's house as soon as I finished

getting my damned ID at City Hall. I could still get out of town before noon if I hurried.

Dad was reading The Kansas City Star at the breakfast table, the remains of his breakfast pushed aside. Trevor was nowhere to be seen – probably still in bed, I thought. I didn't think he had a summer job to go to. Mom dished up a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon, along with toasted homemade bread, and set the plate down in front of me. The smell of her home-cooked breakfast was the best thing I had experienced since I had come home.

My parents made small talk with me as I ate. I thought maybe it was just my imagination. But both of them seemed a little nervous, as if there were things they didn't want to say. I kept the conversation light, and there were no issues until I let slip that I'd probably be leaving after I got home.

"But you just got here!" my mother said mournfully.

"I know," I replied soothingly, ready to spring my big lie, "but Professor Schumacher has some things he wants me to check out with a colleague in Kansas City."

"But you're on a short summer break as it is," my father reminded me. "Surely you can take a few days off."

How could I explain to my parents that the reason I wanted leave right away was that I felt very uncomfortable in my home town. I had already felt something was way out of kilter before Trevor's warning, but now that brotherly plea for me to leave, the strange dream last night, and now my parents' insistence that I stay had me about ready to bolt for the door immediately.

I decided to give in a little. "Just let me pack a few things in my car. Then I can leave later." I didn't want to specify just how much later, but before lunch was in my thinking.

"Can't do that." Dad shook his head. "Mike Hawkins from over at the Tire Store picked it up this morning to get it checked out."

"What!"

"I told you last night I'd do it," he reminded me. That's right; he had said something about it. Besides, I knew it really needed to be serviced. "When will it be ready?" I pressed.

"He said he'd have it done by early afternoon," Dad replied.

Well, there was nothing I could do about it now, I realized.

"Look," he went on, "I'll take you in to get your ID. Then Brian said he'd have somebody run you by home afterwards. Deal?"

My shoulders sagged. "I suppose so." Besides, what was the big deal? It would just delay me for a few hours. If I really wanted to, I could still be out of town before evening. Besides, I was probably just being stupid. What could be wrong in Hawthorne City anyway? It wasn't as if the Body Snatchers had taken over the town. Everybody seemed normal. Trevor was probably just going through some adolescent phase that included teen paranoia. What difference would a few hours make anyway?

If only I'd known...

So I ate a quick breakfast with my parents, tried (again unsuccessfully) to call Russ, and found myself in the passenger seat of Dad's city truck for the short drive to City Hall.

Dad turned south onto Douglas.

"Where are we going?" I asked. "City Hall is east of Douglas."

"We're not going to City Hall," he told me. "ID's are issued over at Dips."

"Dips?" Oh, yeah, Trevor told me about Dips, didn't he?

"He chuckled. "The Department of Public Safety. Their offices are over in the old Emerson Building on Twentieth. They fixed it up real nice, by the way."

The Emerson Building was an old two-story building with a stone façade that must have been impressive in its day. It was designed for professional offices back in the early part of the last century, but it had been deserted for all of my life. Imagine my surprise when I saw what had been done to it. The stonework had been cleaned so that it looked as if it had been laid just that week. Gone were the dirt and water stains that had made it an eyesore for the lives of most residents of Hawthorne City. The windows had been replaced with reflective glass and a bronze sign over the door announced it as The Hawthorne City Department of Public Safety.

In the parking lot that Dad headed for, I could see three Dips cruisers parked side by side. Just how many cars did the department have, anyway? The Hawthorne City Police only had two, as far as I knew. Three in the lot seemed a little excessive – especially since I had seen another one patrolling on the drive over.

Before Dad could get out of the car, I asked him, "Just what's up with this 'Public Safety' stuff?"

Dad looked at me blankly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean how much police presence do we need in this town? Has there been a crime wave here I'm not aware of?"

I asked it sarcastically, but Dad answered seriously, "There were a lot of problems before the department was formed. Now, things are better."

There was an unnatural cadence to Dad's voice, and frankly, I was a little creeped out. It was as if he was reading it from a mental script. "Then why not let the police handle it?"

Dad shook his head. "They couldn't... do what needed to be done. That's why the town brought in a private contractor." It was as if he was having a difficult time finding the right words.

I stared at Dad. "A private contractor? You mean Dips is private?"

Dad just nodded.

Before I could ask another question, Brian Langford burst out the front door of Dips with a huge mayoral smile on his face, right hand extended. He grabbed my hand in his and pumped it enthusiastically. "Great to see you, Andy," he enthused. I only hoped he hadn't seen the grimace on my face; I hated to be called Andy. It was Andrew or nothing. "And you're right on time, too."

On time? On time for what? I was just there to get a worthless ID and be driven home. I turned to question my dad, but he was already getting into the car without even a backward glance. "Dad..." I started to call out.

"Your dad's got a lot of important work to do," Brian explained. "Don't worry. As soon as you're done, I'll arrange a ride home for you."

Before I could protest, Brian was ushering me through the door.

"We're doing great things here in Hawthorne City," he told me proudly. "And now, you'll be a part of it."

"Mr. Langford--"

"Call me Brian."

"Brian then, I just came to get my ID. I'll be going back to Chicago pretty quickly..."

"Maybe," he allowed, "but you might just decide to stay right here."

Was he even listening to what I was saying?

He led me into a stark reception area painted in government beige. There was no receptionist – I guessed because it was Saturday. "Lisa Harding is going to be your case worker," he went on. "You'll like her. She's gotten a fair number of people settled in."

"Look, Brian, I don't mean to be rude, but can I just get my ID and leave?"

He stopped and looked at me for a moment as if I had just told him that the sky was red. Then with a sigh, he began, "Andy, do you remember what Hawthorne City was like when you went off to college?"

Sure, I remembered, but I didn't want to say it outright. Hawthorne City had been your typical dying farm town – the sort of town nearly everyone in my high school class who had an ounce of intelligence and drive wanted to get out of as quickly as possible. Rather than be so blunt, I just nodded silently.

Brian must have known what I was thinking. "Well, it might surprise you to know a lot of us older folks were starting to feel the same way. Something had to be done – and done quickly – before things got so bad there'd be no way to turn them around. Then one day, we got in contact with a company called Orpo Municipal Consultants. You may have heard of it."

I shook my head. Brian just shrugged. "I suppose there's no reason why you should have heard of them. They're a company that helps small communities like ours harness economic growth and turn our declining towns around – all over the world. Sound interesting?"

"I suppose so," I agreed, realizing that small towns everywhere would be a market for hucksters promising to reverse the inevitable.

"It sure is," he agreed. "And I know what you're thinking. You think we hired a bunch of consultants with all kinds of meaningless programs to help the town get back on its feet."

How perceptive. That was exactly what I thought. I had to admit that Brian was no dummy.

"Well, believe me, OMC is different," he assured me, opening an office door where a very attractive and rather familiar woman about my age was sitting primly at a desk. She looked vaguely familiar, but my attention rested on what she was wearing – the same gray Dips uniform shirt I had seen at the barbeque. So Dips ran the ID program. Somehow, it figured, and I was starting to wonder if Trevor hadn't been right.

She was tapping a few keys on her computer, but turned to face me. She smiled a friendly smile, removing her glasses to look at me. "Hi, Andrew, how have you been?"

"G... great, Lisa," I stammered. The name came to me suddenly. I had known Lisa Simmons back in high school. She and I were the same age and had even dated for a couple of months – nothing serious, but some heavy petting had been involved. But Brian had given her a different last name. "Harding? You're married?"

She motioned for me to sit down in a rather uncomfortable guest chair in front of her desk. "Gil Harding and I got married right after high school."

"Oh, sure," I remarked vaguely, remembering suddenly that they had been a couple through most of our senior year. He was a big farm boy who had worked for his uncle drilling water wells. I suspected he still was doing that. He never cared about school. We had been on the football team together.

Her smile faded. "You don't keep in touch with anyone around here except for family, do you?" Then she glanced at her computer screen. "Oh, and Russ Wheaton. You guys were always great friends, weren't you?"

"Yeah, we were." Still are, I thought to myself, wondering again why I hadn't heard from Russ.

She leaned back and chuckled. "I can remember you and Russ our senior year. Number one and two in the class. Which was which?"

"We tied," I told her. "We were co-valedictorians."

"That's right!" The way she said it, I knew she remembered all along. "Both of you guys were like twins. I don't mean you looked alike, but neither one of you could wait to get out of this town and leave all the local yokels behind."

"That's a little unfair," I protested, although the truth of her words did sting a bit. "We just both had ambitions that would take us elsewhere."

Lisa shrugged. "Maybe so, but a lot of us that stayed here thought you guys were sure you were so superior."

I sighed, "Look, Lisa. I just came here to—"

"I know," she broke in, "to be processed and get your ID. Well, let's get on with it then shall we? I'm sure you have important things to do."

Such sarcasm.

It was my turn to shrug. "Okay, what do you need?"

"We'll do the paperwork first," she decided.

We spent the next few minutes as I gave her all the usual personal information. She dutifully typed it all into the system. Finally, the questions stopped and she reviewed the information on her screen. When she was finished, she pressed a key on her keyboard. Strange, I thought. It was a key labeled "process start". It was just beyond the F12 key. I had never seen that key on a keyboard before. As she pressed it, I felt an odd shudder.

"Okay," she declared. Her pervasive scowl suddenly brightened into a smug little smile as she scanned the screen. I tried to lean over to see what had change her mood, but she quickly blanked the screen before I could read it. Without any explanation, she then motioned to a door to her right. "Go through there and await instructions."

"What about my ID card?"

"Oh, you'll get your card," she giggled. "Just wait for it in the next room."

I was calm but curious. In all honesty, I should have been on my guard, turned, and walked out of the building. But it was as if something was holding me back. Without a further word, I did as she had ordered, expecting to find myself in another waiting room while my ID was processed. As I entered the indicated room, closing the door behind me, I saw a small space, maybe twelve by twelve, containing only three items: a single straight-back chair placed in front of a standing full-length mirror, and a cheap standalone closet, covered in a thin veneer of wood and trimmed in black metal. There were no windows or doors other than the door I had come through, the lighting being provided by fluorescent bulbs recessed in an acoustical ceiling.

"Sit please," a voice instructed. The voice was familiar. Where had I heard it before? I felt a chill run up and down my back as I remembered – it was the voice from the dream.

"I'd rather stand," I replied nervously to the voice. I looked up when I addressed it, as it seemed to be coming from above. I could see no speakers, though.

A sigh permeated the room. The voice asked, "Andrew, Andrew, why must you be so difficult? Oh, very well; stand if you must, but you'll soon wish you had done as I asked."

I was about to ask why when the air pressure in the room seemed to increase dramatically,

and I could feel my shirt and pants pressing against my skin. I had read somewhere that an explosion will cause a sudden shock wave. I suppose in a way, it was an explosion, although not in any terms I might have previously defined it. The feeling only lasted for a moment, and at first, I thought it might be the result of an explosion somewhere nearby.

An explosion would not have caused what happened next, though. Suddenly, my clothing seemed to change in texture, becoming rough and gritty. Then I felt everything I wore become insubstantial and fall in sand-like particles away from my body, leaving me naked inside of a minute. The residue seemed to become transparent before disappearing completely.

"What the hell..." I began, choking suddenly as my voice slipped up an octave.

I looked down at myself. My body was rippling, its contours shifting as I watched. I felt hair suddenly spreading over my ears and down my neck, glancing into the mirror to see it cascading over my back. It was still brown, but it seemed to have changed texture as well as length, becoming smoother, shinier as it flowed down my back and over my chest.

Every muscle in my body seemed to be spasming, and I could barely stay on my feet. I watched in horror as my chest began to undulate, dark hairs shriveling and falling away as my nipples began to darken and expand. I reached up for one of them, intending to press it back to stop its movement, but instead I yelped in my new higher voice as a nail brushed against it, causing an electrical sensation.

I grabbed the back of the chair to steady myself, allowing myself to stand for a few more moments. I looked directly into the mirror, gasping as I watched every part of my body moving as if made of clay, being manipulated by an unseen sculptor.

At last, the effort became too much for me, the muscles in my arms and legs too spasmodic to support me. I screamed in frustration, my new, higher voice piercing the silence of the room as I sprawled onto the floor. I was starting to pass out, everything getting darker. The last thing I heard before I was out cold was the strange voice from above:

"I told you that you should sit down..."

I don't know how long I was out, but I suspected it was only a few minutes. Consciousness slowly returned as I lay there in a heap in front of the mirror. The room was quiet, so I just lay there trying to get my faculties back before I attempted to stand, listening to my rough, irregular breathing.

Something felt odd. Hell, who am I kidding? Everything felt odd. I felt chilly, but then I remembered what had happened to my clothing, and I remembered watching my body shifting out of control. I tried to shake off the confusion that had me almost unable to process what was happening around me. I shook my head, surprised to feel something whispering across my face, neck and shoulders as I did. It was... hair: lots and lots of hair.



Desperately, I tried to regain my balance enough to sit up, grabbing at the hair. I pulled a long strand forward so that it was in front of my face. It was chestnut in color – not the dull brown of my own hair. It swirled in a soft curl, and when I tried to pull it straight, I could feel a slightly painful tug on my scalp. It was attached to me.

While my eyes were trying to focus on my hair, I looked at my fingers holding the strand. My fingers? Really? The fingers were long and slender, tipped with longish oval nails painted a pearl pink. Dropping the strand of hair, I looked at my entire hand – small and delicate, and completely smooth.

I was sitting up now, my attention suddenly drawn to the odd sensations on my chest as two perfectly-formed breasts swayed just at the bottom of my line of vision. I had never seen breasts from such an angle before. I found myself studying them, as if they were some detached exhibit placed in front of me. From my perspective, they were absolutely huge, although I was to learn later, they were quite in proportion to the rest of me. My addled mind found their appearance completely fascinating, partially browned in an even tan, then white as my gaze moved more toward the nipples. A bikini line, I reasoned, examining a few tiny moles

and blemishes.

"Awake, I see," the disembodied voice observed. "I told you that you should sit down, didn't I?"

I stopped exploring my body. As impossible as it seemed, I knew what had happened to me. I didn't need to explore further right then. I could feel the changes to my ass. I felt as if it were twice as wide and as soft as a pillow. I could sense something missing between my legs, but felt something... new in its place. I looked up at the ceiling, as if the voice were coming from someone above me and cried out in a soft soprano, "What the fuck have you done to me?"

"I would think that was obvious," the voice said calmly. "Why not stand up and take a look in the mirror? We can talk later."

I did as the voice suggested, feeling my heart beating wildly as flesh shifted and pooled in unnatural (at least for me) configurations. Hair fell down my back and along my face. Breasts leaped up slightly before resting in place. My hips seemed to spread further from my body, and my entire torso seemed lighter, smaller... weaker...

The girl looking back at me in the mirror was attractive – not beautiful, but she would still turn more than a few heads. Her face was cute – there was no other word for it – with a lightly tanned complexion with a few small freckles for accent. Even without makeup, the face was attractive. Her eyes were large and blue, with dark, arched eyebrows raised in surprise. Except for the eye color, she looked a little like a very young Jennifer Connelly. The hair, as I've already remarked, was chestnut brown, flowing down in front in soft waves nearly to the nipples of my breasts.

Yes, breasts.



I could feel the long hair brushing down my back as well, but the sensation of the hair caressing the tops of my breasts was far more overpowering than the feeling of hair running past my shoulder blades. The breasts were large without being obscenely huge. They swayed as I moved and seemed to have a personality of their own, given the large pinkish nipples and pronounced shape. I was to learn later that they were 34C's – not overly large for my new five-five frame – but they were the most spectacular I have ever seen up close and personal. Okay, strippers I had seen had larger ones, but strippers often had surgical help; these were all natural, never having submitted to a surgeon's knife.

I looked down at my legs and feet, purposefully bypassing my lower torso. I already knew what I would see there – or maybe that should be wouldn't see there – and decided to prolong the inevitable. My legs were, perhaps, my best features. I must immodestly admit that so far, I hadn't seen any bad features, but the legs were nothing short of spectacular. Tanned

like the rest of my new body, they were long and firm, the muscles smooth and feminine. I could only imagine what legs like mine must look like in high heels.

Scratch that thought, I told myself.

No sense putting it off any longer, I realized. My gaze moved up to the junction between my legs. I had a neatly-trimmed bush in the same delightful chestnut shade, thankfully hiding the slit embedded within. My waist was trim, my hips wide and feminine...

I was a girl.

How? Why? The questions begged answers. What had happened to me was impossible – well beyond any known science. I didn't have much time to ponder, though. The door opened and Lisa sauntered in. From watching her in the mirror, I could see a smug look on her face. "Well, didn't we turn out nicely?" she commented sarcastically. I could feel my face flush.

"What's going on here?" I demanded, turning to face her. Whether it was my nudity, my new soprano voice, or both that caused her to grin widely, I felt ashamed and tried reflexively to cover my crotch and breasts with my hands.

"Not easy to be modest with so much to cover, is it?" she laughed. She stopped, her hands on her hips as she inspected me from head to toe.

"Answer me!" I practically screamed, my feminine voice carrying little menace, I was afraid to admit.

She shrugged. "Everybody has a role to play here in our community. I guess it was decided that you'd be a sweet young thing. Take a look." She held out an ID. I snatched it out of her hand and looked at it. It looked very much like the one Brian had shown me the previous evening, but this one had the name "Amanda Mae Stone" printed on it. The bastards had given me the name of my deceased infant sister. The address was my parents' address, of course. I practically got ill as I saw the "F" for female, followed by a birth date. It was the right day but the wrong year. According to my new ID, I was barely eighteen. The occupation said "Student – Senior Hawthorne City High."

Oh crap.

Lisa positively giggled. "That's right. You're a Hawthorne City resident again. Think of all the fun things you have to look forward to – it's your senior year, so there's sports... I wonder if you're a cheerleader? Then there's the proms and other dances. Of course, there'll be guys..."

"This isn't possible..." I muttered out loud. I must have muttered it three or four times as Lisa

went on happily telling me all I had to look forward to.

"But first," she announced, "we have to get you ready to go. We need to get you dressed and made up- "

"No makeup, damn it!"

"But of course you'll need makeup," she insisted. "Not too much, though. You're such a girl next door type that too much makeup would ruin the look. Let's get you dressed as well." She walked over to the closet and opened one of the doors. As I watched in horror, she pulled out a very short blue denim skirt, a white top (which I would later learn was called a "crop top"), a robin's egg blue bra and panty set, and a makeup bag similar to the one my last girlfriend had owned.

She handed the bra and panties to me. "Here, put these on."

"No!"

She sighed dramatically. "Very well. I'll call Public Safety over to get you dressed. An old friend of yours is on duty this morning... you remember Butch Schumacher?"

She smiled with amusement as I snatched the undergarments from her and struggled to put them on. "Can you help me?" I asked as I fumbled with the bra.

"Do it yourself," she ordered. "You're going to be wearing one for the rest of your life. You might as well get used to putting it on right now."

I did manage as she watched, enjoying my discomfort immensely. I finally realized with a little experimentation that as a girl, I was much more limber. I was actually able to stretch my arms far enough behind my back to fasten the catches on the bra. It wasn't easy, though. The longer fingernails made it more difficult to get a good grip on the bra, and I was certain I'd have sore breasts from shoving them securely enough into the cups to keep them from swaying as I moved my arms.

"Just what's your problem with me?" I asked as I finished.

"Well, Mr. – or I suppose it's Ms now – Valedictorian, I told you already, but I guess you weren't listening. You and your friend Russ always thought you were too good for this town. Well, not anymore, honey. We have plans for you now, as you'll find out soon enough. Now let's get you dressed."

I didn't argue with her anymore. The threat of Butch or some other Public Safety goon

roughing me up was enough to get me to cooperate. Silently, I pulled the white crop top on, embarrassed at how much skin on my belly it left exposed. I tried vainly to pull it down to cover more skin, but when I did, all it managed to do was pull down exposing more of my new breasts. Finally, I gave up. I pulled up the denim skirt, once again disturbed at the amount of skin it left exposed. The hem ended so far up my leg that it became quickly apparent that if I dropped anything, I'd have to kneel to pick it up; bending over would not be a good option.

For shoes, I was given two-inch wedge heel white straw sandals, which left my cute little toes exposed so that everyone could see that the polish that had somehow appeared on them matched that on my fingers. At least I didn't have to wear stockings. My legs were so smooth and hairless that nylon would have added nothing to their tanned beauty.

After I was done, Lisa pushed me down into the chair and did a quick job on my hair. She left it mostly free, pinning it here or there to give it some shaping. Then, the makeup application began.

"Wait! No makeup," I insisted, pushing her hand away as she wielded a powder-laden brush near one of my cheeks.

"Every girl needs makeup," she told me with a malicious smile.

"No makeup!" I repeated emphatically.

"Step away, Ms Harding," the mysterious voice interrupted calmly. Whoever belonged to that voice was obviously calling the shots. I smiled at Lisa, sure that I had won this round.

I was wrong.

"Ms Stone," the voice began patronizingly, "I believe it's time you accepted that you are no longer in charge. Now, will you allow Ms Harding to apply your makeup?"

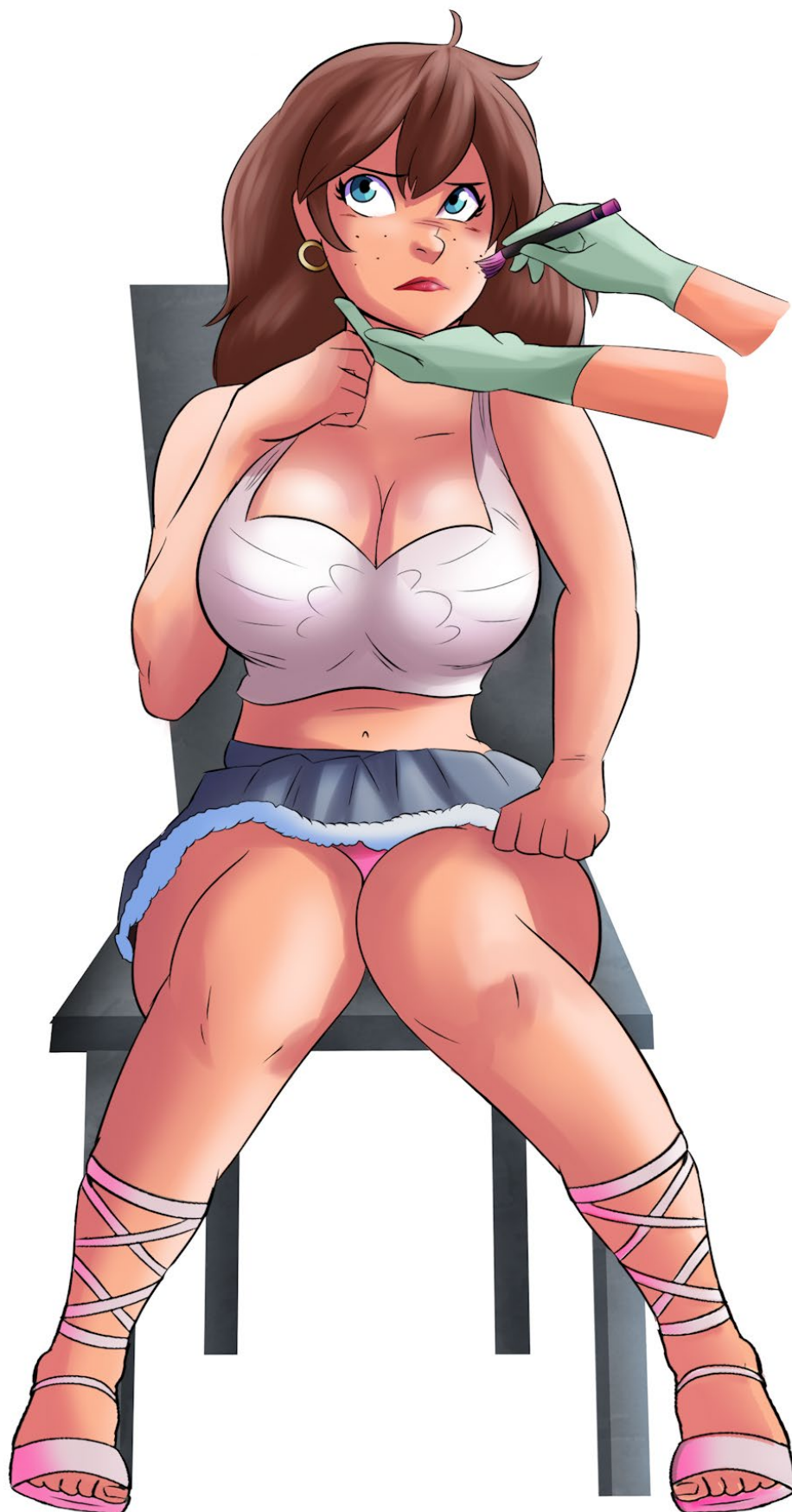
"No!"

There wasn't another chance for me. Without warning, a shock ran through my body unlike anything I had ever experienced before. Pain ripped through my entire being, from the surface of my scalp to the tip of my toes. By all rights, I should have passed out, but something kept me conscious, entirely against my will. The shock probably lasted only seconds, but it felt like an eternity.

Then, as suddenly as it began, it ended, the only sound in the room my gasping sobs of fear. Without a word, Lisa began to brush powder onto my cheeks. My hand rose feebly to stop her, but snapped back to the arm of the chair as fear of another shock overrode my

resistance.

Lisa stood in front of me as she worked on my face, so I wasn't able to see what she was doing too me. "You do have great skin," she admitted as she worked on me, as if nothing had happened before. In spite of her obvious dislike of me, there was just a small glimmer of sympathy in her eyes for me. "I could do a better job if they gave me a vanity table in here, but this will do for now."



She stood back so that I could see what she had done to me. I actually gasped when I saw my face. If I thought I was cute before, I was really, really cute now. Again, I didn't look like a Hollywood starlet or some glamorous supermodel, but I did look like the poster child for The Girl Next Door. My nearly-clear skin, actually enhanced with tiny freckles, was still there, but my face looked more dramatic, with eyes that were deep and wide and lips that seemed to demand to be kissed. A girlfriend once told me that when it came to makeup, "less is more." I never understood exactly what she meant until I looked at my face in the mirror.

"Now, for a few finishing touches," she muttered. She slipped a plain silver bracelet over my right wrist, a silver chain necklace around my neck, weighted by a small pendant made to look like a pyramid formed out of a dark blue stone and accented in silver. I felt it come to rest just above my new breasts. Finally, she slipped a two-inch silver ring on each of my ear lobes. I hadn't realized until that moment that my ears had been pierced. "There you go. Take a look at yourself."

I rose slowly, taking in everything about my new self in the mirror. I had to admit to myself that I looked good enough to eat. My face was made up to perfection, somehow making me look sultry and innocent all at once. My hair was tossed gently down my back, but tendrils of the soft chestnut hair draped enticingly over my shoulders to frame my prominent breasts. My top exposed a midriff that was absolutely perfect, with my waist intending in a smooth curve into my hips. If my skirt had been any shorter, it would have been absolutely obscene, exposing long, slim legs, their shape enhanced by the two-inch heels. In short, this girl I had become was a walking wet dream. I wondered how I would be able to manage walking down the street without being propositioned by every man I met. I had to find some way to change back, before some man did more than just proposition me.

"I want to call Brian," I demanded, staring at Lisa's reflection in the mirror behind me.

She just smiled her usual smug smile. "I'm sure the mayor is too busy to talk to you now. Besides, you needn't get your hopes up. He's not going to change you back. He's been through all of this before. Nobody gets changed back. You're just going to have to get used to the new you. Come on, now; I'm sure your ride is waiting for you."

"Ride?"

"You'll see." She motioned for me to precede her out of the room. Who could be waiting for me? My father? The Department of Public Safety? What if Butch Schumacher was out in front, a hungry look on his face? I hesitated.

Lisa sighed. "Come on. I have other work to do. I want to get out of here early today and start

my weekend. So go!"

With seemingly no other choice, I started for the door.

"Don't forget this!" Lisa called, holding out a white purse with a long strap. Reluctantly, I grabbed it and slung it over my shoulder. It was a little uncomfortable, but what could I do?

There was a white Ford pickup truck waiting in front of the building, a green picture of a barn on the side with "Wheaton Farm Supply" in green letters below it.

"Russ?"

The passenger door opened, and I could see Russ Wheaton's worried face. He jerked his head swiftly as a silent invitation to get in. He didn't have to do it twice. I hurried as fast as I could to get in before anyone else saw me. Hurrying probably wasn't the best decision, though. I wasn't used to the balance of my body, the height of my heels, or the swinging of my purse, so it was a miracle I didn't fall flat on my face as I ungracefully pitched forward, catching the open truck door just in time. The seat was a little high for me, especially now, but I managed to climb up into it, flashing a great beaver shot in the process. Fortunately, no one was around to see.

"Are you okay?" Russ asked, pulling me into a more secure position in the seat.

"Do I look okay?" I snapped, fighting with the seat belt to get it on without lacerating my breasts. I swiveled my head around, looking into Russ's eyes. I was suddenly startled. Russ looked different somehow. Okay, I hadn't seen him in a year, but he had definitely changed. His face looked a little younger – like it had when we were in high school. But his upper body was better developed than I remembered. Russ had always been a little better developed than me, but now, he looked like a body builder, with well-muscled arms and a chest that caused his green logoed polo shirt to stretch out over an impressive chest. I gave a little gasp. "What happened to you?"

He shrugged. "The same thing that happened to you – just not as... pronounced."

"Russ, what the hell is going on?"

"Look, I'm on my lunch break right now..."

"Lunch break?"

He pointed at the logo for Wheaton Farm Supply on his polo shirt. "Yeah, I'm working for dad now over the summer."

“What – ”

He held up his hand. “Look, no more questions right now. Let’s go someplace where we can talk while we eat lunch, okay?”

I nodded. Russ was calm while I was practically unglued. Hawthorne City was a small town. Wherever he intended to go to have lunch had to be nearby. I could wait a few minutes, though – or at least I hoped I could.

Isaac’s was a little sandwich shop a couple of blocks away from downtown. They served great sandwiches, and in the summer, there was a shaded area next to the shop sprinkled with picnic tables. Russ had me hold down a table while he went in to get the food. He didn’t need to ask me what I wanted. I always ordered the same thing every time I was at Isaac’s – a Ruben with fries and a large Coke. Russ always went for the roast beef and potato salad, also with a Coke.

I began to regret agreeing to hold down the table the instant Russ left me. The drive over had only taken five minutes, so sitting next to Russ in the truck, I hadn’t really come to terms with what had happened to me yet. In my mind, I was still Andrew Stone, and all of this was some incredibly detailed cross-dressing dream. Russ hadn’t spoken to me he drove. That wasn’t really unusual. He had always been non-communicative as he drove. So in the silence, I had been trying to adjust to my new body – and failing.

Think about it. What had happened to me was the stuff of fantasy. Sure, people like Bruce Jenner changed sex, but that was through months of intensive hormone treatment and major surgery. As for me? I had simply walked into a city office to get an ID and left an hour later as a complete young woman.

So there I was – in my mind still a man in spite of what the evidence told me. I was in a truck with my best friend, Russ, just as I had been hundreds of times before. It had to all be an illusion, I tried to reason – all physical evidence to the contrary.

So when we reached Isaac’s, I stumbled clumsily out of the truck, my purse banging against my hip and my breasts swaying, trying to pretend it wasn’t really happening. I headed directly for the outside tables, trying not to look like a spastic as I tried to negotiate the way various parts of my body swung or swayed. I thought I did okay, taking slower, shorter steps than I normally would, while holding my errant purse a little more securely so it didn’t interfere with my balance.

Once seated at the table, I was finally beginning to accept that I was now an eighteen-year-old girl, still in high school. As much as I wanted to believe it, this was not a dream. I had

breasts, an ample ass, long wavy chestnut hair, and a body that screamed “girl!” I felt absolutely naked sitting there under the shade of a big oak tree. Between my bare midriff and long legs stretching out under the table, I was starting to draw a lot of male attention.

Some guy about my (new) age, locked his eyes on mine. Oh-oh, that could mean trouble. Quickly, I looked away, trying to dismiss the sudden impression that the guy was hot. I dived into my purse, looking for something to distract me. Of course, right there on top was my cell phone, in a predictably pink case. I grabbed it at once. Maybe I could call someone to help me.

But who?

Calling 911 didn’t seem like a very good idea. Something told me my call would be routed to the Department of Public Safety. The who would come to my rescue? Butch Schumacher... or someone worse? The State Patrol might work – the someone federal – the FBI maybe?

I started to call information to connect me, but at the last moment, I hesitated. What was I going to say? Help! I’ve been changed into a sexy high school girl, but I’m really a twenty-something male college student. Yeah, sure. That was going to get me help all right – help in finding a padded cell.

But wait a minute. Even if I didn’t look like Andrew Stone, he still existed, didn’t he? All I needed to do was get someone else – my brother or my parents – to verify that I was really Andrew Stone...

No, wait a minute. I needed more information before I tried to call anyone and prove who I really was. Didn’t I? My mind was tangled in a perpetual conflict. Part of me wanted to call now, but an equal part of me wanted to wait until... until... Until something. I was confused, frightened, worried, angry, and about ten other emotions I couldn’t even verbalize. I-

“You okay?”

I looked up from my phone to see Russ standing there, a plastic tray in his hands, heaped with food and drinks. He looked concerned. That was so sweet of him...

Sweet?

“Hang on, let me take care of the food. Then we’ll talk.” He looked around at the other customers eating their lunches. Then, in a quieter voice, he cautioned, “But keep it down. We don’t want anyone else to hear us.”

After he had distributed the food and gotten rid of the tray, he sat across from me, eyeing the

other patrons. Finally satisfied that no one was paying any undue attention to us, he began, "Okay, I know you want to know what's going on. I don't know a lot, but I'll tell you what I know."

"Start with what's happened to us," I prompted, trying to keep my voice barely above a whisper to match Russ's.

"Look," he sighed, "this town has changed in ways I can't begin to describe. Everybody's frightened, but nobody can say anything. The punishments are pretty extreme.

"I got back here a couple of days ago. After I had been home for a couple of hours, Dad insisted on taking me to get my ID – to get 'processed' in other words. The next thing I know, I'm like this." He motioned at his body. "I'm still me, but now I'm a big high school jock. Apparently, I'm the starting fullback for the football team this year. Andrew, you oughta see the guys on the team. We all look like starting college seniors on a top team. We're sure to take the Midland Empire Conference title this year."

"To hell with the conference title," I broke in. "Tell me why the hell this is happening. Why are you the big strong football hero and I'm in a miniskirt?"

He shook his head. "I don't know. It's like I don't even know this town anymore. It's like Invasion of the Body Snatchers..."

I caught the reference. Russ and I were both big fans of old sci-fi movies.

"...Everybody seems different. After I changed, my Dad and Mom refused to even talk about this. When I tried to ask what was going on, they would just tell me to act normal and everything would be all right. Yesterday, I saw what they meant. Remember Carl Tollinger?"

I nodded. Carl was two years younger than us, but we had played football together.

"He tried to rally some people downtown yesterday to march on City Hall. The Dips got him. You know about the Dips?"

I nodded. "So what did the Dips do with him?"

Russ shrugged. "Who knows? They dragged him into a car – not too gently, by the way – and drove off with him. I heard from somebody in the store today that nobody has seen him since."

I shook my head. "This is just plain crazy. So who would bother to do this, and why hasn't somebody called the authorities?"

"Why haven't you called the authorities?" he countered.

His question shocked me. "Well, I began, I guess because I've been too stunned by this to make the call..."

He pulled out his cell phone, punched in some numbers and handed me the phone. "That's the number for the State Patrol," he explained. "Here. Just press 'call' and I'll listen in."

I put the phone down on the table and pushed it back to him. "Here. You call. I don't want to talk to them like this."

He said nothing, just looking at me with something close to amusement. Then, after what seemed like hours, he said softly, "Can't do it, can you?"

I was really flustered now. "Well, sure, I can do it, but... but..."

He shook his head, putting the phone back in his pocket. "No, you can't. None of us can, I suspect. Something is preventing us from calling for help."

"But what about Carl?" I pointed out. "He tried to rally people."

"I don't know," Russ admitted. "Maybe whatever is holding us back doesn't work on everyone. Or maybe there's a way to overcome it that only Carl figured out. In any case, here we are – stuck in the Twilight Zone version of Hawthorne City."

"Okay," I sighed. "So what do we do about it? I don't know about you, but once through high school was enough for me, and I certainly don't want to go back there like this."

"For the moment, we just have to play our parts," he replied. "Now, before you go all crazy on me, I don't like any of this either. But do you see any quick way out?"

I thought about that. Obviously, rebellion didn't work. Carl Tollinger had proven that. I wasn't even certain that I could rebel even if I wanted to. If I couldn't call the authorities, how could I march into City Hall and demand that I be changed back into Andrew Stone? I wasn't anxious to find out what had happened to Carl. Maybe the only answer was to appear to be cooperative until we could discover exactly why this was going on.

"Okay," I finally agreed. "We'll play it your way – for now. But no matter what, I don't plan to go back to high school as a girl. I suppose I'm a cheerleader or something, too?"

He smiled just a little. "Nope. You're not a cheerleader. You're just a cute, popular girl – or at

least you will be."

"What do you mean, 'will be'?"

"Well, as I understand it, you're dating one the real stars on the football team – me."



I could feel my face turn red. "OH fuck, no. This is too unreal."

"Hey, look on the bright side," he chuckled. "Dating a big guy like me means all the other guys will leave you alone."

He had a good point. I knew Russ well; he was my best friend. As long as he and I appeared to be an item, everyone else would leave us alone.

Russ drove me home right after lunch. He filled me in on a couple of other details while he drove. Apparently, there was a dance Saturday night for the incoming high school seniors that we were expected to go to.

"I'm not going," I insisted, crossing my arms emphatically without considering I would be scrunching my breasts in the process.

"It's a command performance," Russ countered. "You have to show your ID at the party. If you're not there, you can expect a visit from Dips."

"You're kidding!" I gasped.

He shook his head. "Nope. They take all of this stuff seriously around here now. It's a dress-up affair, too, so you'll have to figure out how to blend in."

This sounded almost like the way villagers were treated in Nazi Germany, I realized. We were all being regimented and forced to fit into preconceived roles. But to what purpose? What was so important about one small town in Missouri to force such a structured social system on us? What was so important about Hawthorne City anyway?

"We're here," Russ said, breaking me out of my reverie. I looked up to see that we were in front of my parents' house – my house again, it seemed.

"I'll talk to you later," Russ promised. I just nodded and started to open the door, but before I could, Russ leaned over to me and quickly planted a kiss on my lips. On my lips, for God's sake. I was too stunned to acknowledge what he had done, but I did notice that the look on his face was... normal, as if this was something he did to me all the time. I jumped out of the truck as quickly as I could, and watched in startled silence as he pulled away.

I looked around; making certain no one had seen us. I didn't want anyone to know what Russ had just done to me. I just stood there for a moment, gathering my thoughts and preparing to meet my family. Damn it, why did Russ have to kiss me? Now, I would be upset as I faced my family.

And to make matters worse, a small hidden part of me had to admit that the kiss had been just a little bit enjoyable.

My house key had been placed in my purse, so I didn't have to wait outside for anyone to answer the door. I entered quickly, breathing a sigh of relief to be alone at last for the first

time since my transformation. My relief didn't last long, though.

"That you, Andrew?" Trevor's voice called from the kitchen. Before I could reply, he came into view, a sandwich in his hand. He nearly dropped it in surprise. "Who are you?" he finally managed.

My face turned hot in embarrassment. "It's me, Trevor – Andrew."

Trevor's knees nearly gave out. "Oh, shit."

"Yeah," I agreed. "Oh shit. Trevor, what's going on around here?"

"I tried to warn you," Trevor reminded me, unable to take his eyes off my body. "You should have just left town."

"Why didn't you tell me this might happen?"

"Would you have believed me if I told you?" he shot back. He was right, though. I wouldn't have believed him. Who would? People don't change gender – at least not like I did. I would have thought Trevor was smoking funny stuff if he'd told me what might happen. "Besides, I couldn't tell you. You hadn't been processed yet."

"What does that have to do with it?" I demanded, trying to make my sweet girlish voice sound forceful. Instead, I sounded like some bratty teenage girl in a sitcom. To make matters worse, my hands were on my newly-expanded hips, adding visual support for the bratty teen girl look. I tried to remove them, but the position just seemed too natural to change.

"You'll find out," he told me. "You can't tell people who haven't been processed anything about what's happening here. I don't know how or why; that's just the way it is. I told you as much as I could, and you didn't listen."

I had listened. It's just as if the fates had conspired against me to keep me from leaving town. I threw my purse down on the couch. "So why did they turn me into a girl?"

Trevor shrugged, motioning for me to go back to the kitchen with him. Once there, he elaborated, "They do that sometimes – not often, but sometimes. One of the guys in my class had it happen to him. I don't know why and nobody asks. I didn't think it would happen to you, though. After all, Mom and Dad are sort of VIP's around here. They should have been able to prevent it."

"So how do I manage to change back?" That was the most important question, I realized. If they could do this to me, there had to be a way to change back. All I wanted was to change

back into Andrew and get the hell out of this crazy town.

"I don't think you can," he replied, causing my stomach to tie itself into knots. "At least I haven't heard of anybody changing back yet."

"But if they can change boys into girls, it stands to reason they can change girls into boys," I argued.

"Maybe," he allowed. "But I haven't heard of them changing any girls into boys."

Crap. I had already spent more than enough time being a girl. I wanted my life back. Someone had to have answers. I could always drive myself downtown and confront Brian. Oh, wait – no I couldn't. My car was in the shop, and Mom and Dad weren't home, so all the family cars were gone. And I didn't want to walk all the way to Brian's office in this body. I wasn't even sure I could make it in those heeled sandals.

"I'm getting out of this girly shit," I announced and headed for my room.

"Wait!" Trevor called after me, but I was already half way up the stairs, leaning forward in the damned heels.

My next shock – one of many I was doomed to experience that day – was when I saw my room. Mom and Dad weren't the sort who had kept my old room just like it had been when I was in high school, as if hoping I would someday want all the paraphernalia I had collected during my boyhood. When I had left the house that morning, I had left a somewhat gender-neutral guest bedroom, done up in white paint, tan blinds, and generically brown furniture, but now...

Everything was yellow and white – and undeniably girly. The bed was done up in yellow sheets and covers which matched the ruffled curtains, and all the furniture was white – including a vanity with what I recognized as beauty products neatly arranged on its top.

Well, at least it was yellow and not pink, I told myself glumly. Small comfort, though.

"They delivered all of this stuff this morning," Trevor explained behind me.

I turned to face him and scowled. "So if you saw them delivering this, you must have known what was going to happen. Why didn't you realize who I was when I came in the house?"

Trevor shrugged. I used to do that when I was his age, I reminded myself. "I just never thought you'd be so... so..."

"So what?" I practically yelled at him, my hands on my hips in what I suddenly realized was a very girly pose.

"So hot!" he blurted out, turning red as he realized what he had said.

"Hot?" Why was a little part of me pleased to hear that? The rest of me certainly was not.

"Yeah... hot," he reiterated. "I mean, you look... well... Hey Andrew, could I... I mean, would you..."

"Spit it out Trevor!"

His face turned red again. "Could I maybe see your... your..."

I suddenly realized where he was looking. "You want to see my... my..." I couldn't say "breasts", but I could tell that's what he wanted. The little perv! I was his brother for God's sakes!

He brightened up a little. The smile on his face was downright lascivious. "Can I?"



“Get the fuck out!” I screamed at him, my voice rising in pitch even further above my new feminine norm.

He scurried out as if his ass was on fire. If I had had any matches, it probably would have been. I slammed the door behind him, before he could see that I was about to burst into tears. There I was, sitting on my bed, trying to keep from sobbing. I was a fucking sex symbol for my fourteen-year-old brother. How could it get any worse?

I was about to find out.

I spent the next twenty minutes or so sitting on my bed in shock. How could this have happened to me? What was going on in Hawthorne City? I closed my eyes, hoping that this was just some sort of bizarre dream. But closing my eyes wasn’t enough to make the reality of what had happened to me change. Without sight, I could more intensely feel what had been done to me. I could sense the weight of my long hair, and feel it brushing along my bare

shoulders and tickling my ears. I was even more aware of the weight of my new breasts. In addition, I felt my nipples pressed up against the satiny material of my bra. While a relatively pleasant sensation, it was counterbalanced by the uncomfortable pressure on my shoulders, where the bra straps bit into me.

My hips seemed to be an immense expanse, and my ass was almost like sitting on a mound of Jell-O. The only good thing about it was that the sensations reduced my awareness that there was now nothing protruding from between my legs. In all fairness, the lack of pressure from my penis and testicles made sitting actually more comfortable, but I would have gladly welcomed their return, no matter what the price.

The longer I sat, the more my thoughts centered on what I had lost that bothered me the most: my manhood. I remembered seeing an old movie where the protagonist is turned into a girl, wakes up, walks into the bathroom and reaches in his (her) pajamas to grab a penis that's no longer there. Take it from me, he would have noticed what was missing well before he got to the bathroom. A penis and testicles are reasonably weighted, and they swing when you walk. When they're suddenly gone, they are conspicuous by their absence. Take it from me. I know.

Worse yet, there was now an obvious opening to the interior of my body. Oh, I know, it wasn't really not exactly open, but it felt open. Protected only by silken panties, and practically exposed to the world in a short skirt, it felt... vulnerable. A strong male could easily bend me over, rip off the panties, and thrust into me practically at will.

A new emotion overtook me as I thought these vulnerable thoughts.

Fear.

My God, I was a girl – really a girl. Given the shape of my body and the depth of my emotions, I knew this was more than just an outer shell. Deep within me, I was sure there were all the girly parts that females are born with. There had to be ovaries in there, nesting little eggs ready to be fertilized. My brain must be soaked in estrogen, turning on girl urges throughout my body. As if on cue, tears were welling up in my eyes.

Again, I felt the urge to cry as I sat there, but in my mind, that would only make me more of a girl than I already was, so I managed to stifle the urge, allowing only a drop or two of moisture to form in my eyes. No matter what the ID they had issued me said, I was Andrew Mason Stone – Not Amanda Mae Stone – and I would do whatever it took to make sure that my body returned to the man I knew myself to be.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the garage door opening. Thank God, one of my parents was home. I'd talk to either Mom or Dad, take their car and track Brian down. Then

I'd do something to get him to change me back. I jumped up, threw open the door and rushed down the stairs, nearly falling head first as I had forgotten about the two-inch heels. I was still recovering my balance as Mom came in from the garage.

Neither of us spoke for a moment. My mother seemed to be carefully inspecting me. I had expected her to be shocked, but then again, as Brian had said, they had delivered the new furniture for me just that morning, so she would have known I was going to be changed into a girl. Like Trevor, she wouldn't have been able to say anything until I had been "processed." Even so, I felt like a bug under a microscope.

"I can't believe that's really you," she said at last. "You're gorgeous!"

I didn't feel gorgeous. I felt like some sort of freak. "Oh, Mom," I burst out, the tears coming at last, "do something!" I fell into her arms, sobbing. Then I realized she and I were almost exactly the same height. That started me sobbing even harder.

I hadn't hugged my mother while crying since I was eight, but somehow, it felt like the right thing to do. It was comforting, and the feel of my breasts against hers was actually soothing. What was happening to me? It was as if I was becoming a girl in my mind as well as my body. I needed to fight back. I needed to let go of my mother and stand up like a man.

But I wasn't a man, was I?

I just couldn't let go of her. She was my rock – my anchor. In a day in which the impossible became real, she was the only thing keeping me from collapsing in a heap of despair and hopelessness.

At last, Mom's soothing voice calmed my frantic sobs into a subdued whimper. "There, there," she cooed, "everything will be alright."

I wanted it to be so. I really, really wanted to believe her. More than anything, I just wanted to be changed back and go on with my normal life. My normal male life.

At last, my mother released me. "Now," she said primly, "I need to go over a few things with you."

"Mom, call Brian," I pleaded. "Make him change me back!"

She shook her head. "That just isn't possible, Amanda."

Hearing my new name shocked me into disbelief. "You... you know the name they gave me?"

Mom closed her eyes for a moment, as if silently gathering her thoughts. When she opened them, she sat down on the couch and patted the cushion next to me. "Sit down, Amanda." There was that name again. "I have a lot to talk to you about."

Meekly, I sat down next to her, suddenly embarrassed with how naturally I smoothed my short skirt under me, as if I could somehow minimize the creamy thighs that the skirt was too tiny to hide. "Can't you just call Brian?" I asked, upset at how meekly and childlike my voice sounded.

To my dismay, Mom shook her head. "I've already talked to Brian," she admitted. "There's nothing that can be done. Andrew – Amanda – once you're processed, everything is permanent. You're going to be Amanda Mae Stone for the rest of your life."

At last, I knew what a person felt when they found out they had a fatal illness. Of course, becoming a girl wasn't exactly the same. After all, I wouldn't be dying – at least not in the corporeal sense – but Andrew Martin Stone had most certainly ceased to exist. "P...Permanent?" I managed to utter.

Mom nodded her head. "Yes, permanent."

"Mom, what's going on here? None of this is possible."

"Oh, it's possible all right," she countered. "As for what's going on... well, it just sort of happened."

I shook my head, feeling the unfamiliar sensation of long hair tickling my ears and neck. "How could it just happen?"

"Well..." Mom began, and over the next ten minutes, she told me what had happened.

Apparently, last fall, well after my last trip home, Hawthorne City had reached a crisis. Like most small rural communities, the town was dying. The largest company in town, a company that made parts used for heating and air conditioning systems, announced it would be closing down within the next six months, moving two hundred and fifty jobs to Mexico. Coupled with the natural decline in employment in the agricultural industry, Hawthorne City would be devastated.

What to do? As the old saying goes, "desperate times call for desperate measures." In a panic, the City Council reached out to a consulting firm – Orpo Municipal Consultants, the company Brian had mentioned. Before Brian had given me the name of the firm, I had never heard of them, but there had to be thousands of consulting companies out there. The only "Orpo" I had ever heard of was the Ordnungspolizei, a German police organization in the 30's and 40's. OMC's solution was, to say the least, unique. The firm apparently talked the council into

letting them set up a city government inside a city government. Hence, DPS – the Department of Public Safety – was born.

At first, the new department was benign – something between a marketing arm for the city and a consulting body. But over time, that changed. First, by some miracle, OMC managed to talk the departing manufacturer from leaving town. After they accomplished that, they could do no wrong. They convinced the city that petty crime was running rampant, and that DPS should take on the additional role of supplementing the town's tiny police department.

Big mistake.

To make a long story short, DPS became essentially the governing body of Hawthorne City – the mayor and council becoming mere figureheads. New policies were introduced. New city regulations cropped up, limiting the power of other governing bodies, such as the county commissioners and the school board. Were these policies legal? Probably not, but no one seemed to have the will to oppose them.

At last, shortly after the first of the year, something new and unbelievable happened: processing began. Oh, at first it seemed innocent enough. Think of it – a single card that allowed you access to city services. You could use the parks, the library, every conceivable public venue – just by showing your card. Too late, everyone discovered the downside: processed could mean permanent social and physical changes to the citizens of Hawthorne City.

"At first, even that didn't seem so bad," Mom told me. "People with physical defects were suddenly cured. Remember the Nelson boy who lost a leg in that terrible car accident?"

I nodded. Lucas Nelson had been a year behind me in school. He lost a leg my senior year when he crashed his dad's Range Rover into a guard rail out on Twisted Oak Road.

"Well, he has two perfectly good legs now," Mom confirmed.

"But I didn't lose a leg," I pointed out. "I was perfectly healthy." And happy, I might have pointed out. "Why do this to me?"

Mom shook her head. "I don't really know. It happens sometimes, though. I understand about a dozen boys have been turned into girls. No one knows why."

"Well, if Brian isn't running the town, who do I see about this?" I asked, gesturing to my body.

"No one changes back," she reminded me. "You're just going to have to make the best of things the way they are. Now, Brian has offered to help. Do you remember his daughter,

Heather?"

"Vaguely," I replied. Heather had been a freshman when I was a senior. I remembered her as being a cute little blonde, but a little young for my tastes.

"She's coming by here in a few minutes. She's agreed to help you get oriented. I'd help you myself, but I'm sure you'd rather have someone your own age do it."

"Help me get oriented?" I repeated sarcastically. "What's she going to do? Help me pick the right lipstick? Find out which boys are hot?"

Mom nodded. "I'm sure that will be part of it."

"No fucking way!" I yelled, jumping up from the couch.

Mom was quick to stand as well, a scowl on her face with her hands on her hips. It was meant to be an intimidating pose, but it hadn't worked since I was a little boy. Now, though, she was as tall as I was – maybe even a little taller since her heels were higher than mine. "No more of that language, young lady! You're not with your old high school buddies now. Girls who talk like that aren't very well respected, you know."

I thought of telling her that I knew a number of girls – both from my high school days and college – who could out-swear any boy, but now wasn't the time to say that. She was angry enough as it was. Okay, so maybe I was just a little intimidated by her. I needed her on my side, and I wasn't going to get there by giving her a large ration of shit. Maybe if I agreed to get help from Brian's daughter, Mom might be more willing to help me get back to my male self.

"So what does this Heather plan to do with me?" I asked, sounding a little more timid than I had planned. "I don't want to be all girly."

Mom dropped her arms to her side, the scowl disappearing into a guarded expression. "From what Brian said, she'll introduce you to some of her friends and just talk with you about your new role. I doubt if she'll be lining you up with boys or doing your nails..."

We both glanced down at my polished pink nails. There wasn't much she could do to them that hadn't already been done.

"Well..." I drawled, "...as long as it's just talk..." Another thought had already occurred to me. I was well aware that dealing with Heather would probably include a lot of extraneous "girl talk", complete with how my hair looked, what I should wear to be in with the in crowd, and whether or not I liked boys now (why did the image of Russ suddenly pop into my head?), but

I might also learn more about what was going on in Hawthorne City. I wasn't going to learn anything moping in my room. It was time to be a little more proactive.

Mom smiled and took my hands in hers. I grimaced a little when one of her gold bracelets tinkled against my silver one, but hopefully, she didn't notice. "It's not so bad being a girl," she told me. "You'll see."

No, I'm sure from her perspective, it wasn't. After all, by all accounts through the years, she had been an attractive and popular girl in high school. Given that I had heard more than one of my friends say (when they thought I couldn't hear them) that she was a real MILF, I had the distinct feeling that she planned to relive her high school popularity through me.

As if on cue, the doorbell rang. "I'll get it! Mom said cheerily.

I had expected Heather Langford to show up alone, so I wasn't particularly pleased to see her barge into the house with two other girls. Although none of the girls looked like any of the others, they were cut from the same cloth. The leader – obviously Heather, with her long, lustrous gold hair – was about my (new) height with a nearly perfect body. Oh, who am I kidding? It was a perfect body: long legs, trim waist, perfectly rounded breasts and magnificent hips. Hey, I might be a girl myself now, but I could certainly appreciate the perfect female form on someone else. The other two girls were attractive as well, but one was just a little too tall with long black hair and breasts just a bit small, and the other was shorter with breasts just a tad large for her body. Her hair was a dark, lush red, denoting Irish ancestry, but unfortunately, it was accompanied by skin slightly too pale and an overabundance of freckles. Still, I had to admit to myself that if Heather wasn't with them, they would have attracted the interest of any red-blooded male.

Heather greeted me with a somewhat artificial smile. "You must be Amanda," she gushed, taking my hands as my mother had, resulting in the same clink of bracelets. She looked at me critically. "It's hard to believe you were ever a boy," she added, leaving no doubt in my mind that she knew exactly who I had been before. Well, I remembered her, so it stood to reason she probably remembered Andrew.

"This is Melissa," she said, gesturing to the taller girl who nodded reservedly. "And this is Rachel," gesturing to the shorter, well stacked girl. Without a response from me, she went on, "I thought we'd hang out by our pool today and get acquainted. Let's go up to your room and grab something for you to wear." She took my hand and led me up the stairs, not waiting for a response, while the other two girls trailed along behind, quietly following their leader. I was beginning to think I had been magically transported into the movie Mean Girls, but I decided to hold my tongue. No sense in creating enemies unnecessarily. For now, I'd play along.

"Where are your swimsuits?" Heather asked once we were in my transformed room.

"I haven't a clue," I told her. "When I got home, everything was already put away."

"You've got some cool skirts!" Melissa called out, looking in my closet.

"And shoes!" Rachel added.

"Girls," Heather reminded them primly. "We're looking for swimsuits." She began opening and closing my drawers, skimming past piles of bras and panties until she came to a drawer filled with so many colors it looked like an explosion in a Skittles plant. She pulled out a little bikini that looked as if it had taken all of one spool of thread to produce it. "This is perfect!" she crowed.



I gasped. It was a little scrap of practically nothing – a triangle top and a bottom that looked as if it would leave very little to the imagination. I was later to learn that the bottom could make the outfit be described as a butterfly bikini – presumably because when I walked in it, my ass resembled a flying butterfly.

And, of course, the color was the hottest of hot pinks.

I actually backed away from it, as if Heather was holding a poisonous snake in front of me. "I... I can't wear that!" I had visions of my hot new body parading out of the house in that little pink nothing, matching 4" heels on my feet.

Heather must have realized what I was thinking. "We'll all wear what we have on and change at my place. The pool is secluded, so the only ones who'll see you in it are in this room right now – and we'll be wearing something every bit as hot!"

The other girls giggled in agreement.

Well, what the hell, I thought to myself. It would just be the four of us – probably just lounging by the pool getting a healthy tan in equally tiny suits. It wouldn't be so bad, would it? As a male, I'd worn a Speedo before. That was probably every bit as... revealing as the bikini, in its own way. As I watched, Rachel stuffed a towel and the suit in a beach bag she had found in my closet. Then, she put in a pair of dainty matching flip-flops, so my fear of parading around in a teeny suit and high heels faded away. I nodded my acquiescence to Heather, who rewarded me with a knowing smile.

"Let's go, girls," she called out over her shoulders to the other two who had gone back to examining the new clothes in my closet with a critical eye. "We're wasting tanning time."

The four of us bustled down the stairs, and I'm sure I was the only one not giggling. Mom watched approvingly from the bottom of the stairs, while Trevor looked at me with an expression that could only be defined as pity.

"We'll have her back before dinner," Heather told Mom, with the other two girls singing out in agreement. Heather led us all out to her car – a cute little Mini Cooper convertible in spice orange metallic. Rachel and Melissa crammed themselves into the back seat, leaving shotgun for me. Thank god I was shorter as a girl. Even in the front, there wasn't a lot of room. Melissa had to be very cramped in back. I was also glad Heather had parked under the large oak tree shading part of the driveway. Since she had left the top down, my new sexual equipment would have been singed if the seat had been in the sun. I was going to have to remember to make sure my short skirts came down far enough to keep me from cooking my new ass.

I knew Brian and his family lived in one of the better homes in town. I had been there a few times when I was in high school. That's now I knew Heather. So I was surprised when she drove past it.

"Isn't that your house?" I asked, hearing giggles from Rachel and Melissa in the back.

"Used to be," Heather said with a grin.

A couple of minutes later, she dove into a long, meandering driveway that led to a house twice the size of her old one. It was obviously new construction, surrounded by young trees providing little shade. It was a colonial design, built entirely of brick. If I had to estimate its size, I would have guessed between six and seven thousand square feet. In other words, it was only about a dozen bricks short of a mansion. Obviously Brian Langford had done very well for himself in the years I had been in college.

"Like it?" Heather asked.

"It's great," I replied softly, trying to take it all in at one.

"Wait 'til you see the inside," she promised.

She was right about that. I wasn't exactly a devotee of House Beautiful, but I knew expensive when I saw it. Inside, I was greeted by a large entryway with polished oak flooring and a sweeping circular staircase lit by a stunning chandelier. Brian was definitely doing well for himself.

"Come on!" Heather urged, taking my bare arm and pulling me along. "We can get change upstairs."

We all changed in Heather's room. Believe me - that was an experience I wouldn't soon forget. Although I lacked any male equipment, I could still feel myself getting a little turned on as the three girls disrobed in front of me. And it was certainly an odd feeling taking off my own clothes in front of them. Sure, I had already been seen nude in my new form by Lisa, but I had been too stunned then to feel anything but shock. Now, though, I was standing in Heather's bedroom without a stitch on, and I found myself thinking strange thoughts.

Part of me was still thinking like a guy, and looking at three pretty girls bouncing around in the nude giggling and talking like something out of a late-night soft porn movie on cable. But part of me had become incredibly shy, trying to be least in sight as I, too, appeared to be one of them. I tried to hurry, but the little pink bikini was harder to put on than I would have thought. It seemed no matter how hard I tried, something got exposed. Unless I stood just right, my pubic hair, even carefully trimmed, threatened to show. God only knew what my ass looked like now.

As for the top, there was so little material that I estimated that ninety percent of my breast flesh was exposed. Again, I didn't dare move around too suddenly, or I risked the possibility of having a breast escape from it. I squirmed uncomfortably, trying to minimize the exposure.

Rachel and Melissa outright laughed at my efforts, but Heather sighed and grabbed my top, making skilled adjustments to it. "'We haven't got all day, Amanda," she grumbled,

emphasizing my new name. Then she adjusted the bottom of my bikini. "You're not going to expose yourself."

"Unless you want to..." Rachel called out, causing Melissa to go into another spasm of laughter.

"These suits are designed to stay in place," Heather told.

Yeah, sure, I thought to myself. They were probably designed by men to increase the possibility of a "wardrobe malfunction." Still, what Heather had done seemed to have worked. The suit seemed more securely in place, even if it did leave almost nothing to the imagination. Besides, it would be just us girls at the pool. So what if one of them caught a glimpse of my feminine charms? It would be nothing they didn't have themselves. I did make a mental note, though, that if I had to go coed swimming, I would wear a modest one-piece.

I made one more mental note as well. Although all four of us were attired in very, very revealing bikinis, the other girls were wearing bright colors – blue for Heather, orange for Melissa, and green for Rachel – mine, being hot pink, coupled with my fair skin almost made me look like I was wearing nothing at all. It would just be "us girls" I reminded myself yet again.

At the poolside, we rubbed each other down in suntan lotion, again reminding me of late night soft porn on cable. Even though my mind was still thinking enough like a guy to appreciate the feminine flesh surrounding me, my body didn't respond at all. Whatever my transformation had done to me had apparently made me into a heterosexual girl. Remembering the chaste kiss I had with Russ, I realized I would have to be very careful around him – and possibly around other boys as well. My mind might be telling me I was a guy who liked girls, but my body was definitely sending other signals.

We sat in four pool chairs, each group of two flanked on either side of small tables where Heather had laid out glasses of lemonade and a few women's magazines, as well as our cell phones. I took the chair closest to the shade of a tree. I figured I would only experience about an hour in the sun before I was sheltered. The last thing in the world I wanted was a sunburn in this new body of mine. I hated to think what it might be like to sunburn my new breasts. They were sensitive enough without that.



"So what's it like being a boy?" Rachel asked from the chair next to me. It was an unexpected question, and I really had no idea how to answer it.

Heather chimed in from the next chair, "I can't imagine what it must be like to have all that junk between your legs."

Melissa added to the discussion, "Remember last June when Greg got kicked in the crotch at Nick's graduation party?" The other girls nodded and laughed. I, of course, had no idea who she was talking about. "He couldn't do it for three days after that."

"How did you ever survive?" Heather asked dryly. Melissa responded by sticking out her tongue at Heather.

"Really, what's it like?" Rachel pressed.

Given a moment to think about it, I answered, "Well, for one, you're bigger and stronger. I

guess you feel more confident."

Rachel frowned. "Confident? Then why didn't you ever ask my sister out?"

I stared at her blankly.

"Oh, that's right," Rachel sighed. "I didn't tell you my last name. My sister is Kaitlyn Douglas."

Kaitlyn Douglas? I remembered her. She was one of the most popular girls in my high school class.

Rachel grinned. "You didn't know she liked you, did you?"

I was speechless. I certainly had had no idea that Kaitlyn liked me. To be honest, I always thought she was out of my league.

Heather had no trouble picking up on what I was thinking. "So much for male confidence," she remarked.

"So where is your sister now?" I asked, trying to change the subject.

"She went to William Jewel College," she told me. "But she came back for Christmas last year, and now she's living here in Hawthorne City. She's getting married to Jerry Miles this fall."

In my mind, I conjured up a scenario where Kaitlyn came home for Christmas and was trapped as I had been. Now she was just another local girl destined to stay in Hawthorne City, get married, and have a houseful of kids. Was that what they had in mind for me, too?

"Once you get used to it," Melissa called out, "you'll love being a girl, Amanda. I don't know why anyone would want to be a boy anyway. Their clothes are boring, they have all that body hair, and they've got to do all the heavy lifting. Ewww!"

There was no use in telling her that I would have done practically anything to be male again.

We scootched our pool chairs around a bit after about an hour. I stayed pretty much in the shade, and the other girls finally did the same. While my skin was fairer than any of theirs, they obviously were taking precautions to protect themselves from a nasty burn. Once we were resituated, I asked naively, "Aren't we going to do any swimming?"

Heather and the other girls looked at each other for a moment before bursting out in laughter. "Why would we want to do that?" Heather asked.

"She's still thinking like a boy," Rachel chuckled as Melissa nodded in agreement.

I was confused. "But I thought we were going swimming."

Heather rose up and looked at me seriously. "Listen, girlfriend, swimming just ruins your hair. The chlorine isn't good for it."

"And you get too much sun," Rachel added. "At least on top while you're in the pool. Who wants an uneven, blotchy tan anyway?"

"Then you have to redo your makeup," Melissa chimed in. "You want to look good when the boys drop in."

The only thing that dropped at that moment was my stomach. I jumped up from my pool chair. "Wh- what do you mean, 'when the boys drop in'?"

"Reggie and his friends... Oh, right, you don't know any of the guys," Heather began. "Anyway, Reggie Stanton is the quarterback of the football team this year. He and a couple of his buddies usually show up on Fridays after they get off work. They're due any time."

And there I stood – in next to nothing – while this Reggie and his buddies could show up any minute to inspect the merchandise. The last thing I wanted was to have several hundred pounds of mobile testosterone striding in poolside to see me putting practically everything on display.

"But... but..." I sputtered.

"Relax," Heather told me with another laugh. "Everybody's already gotten the word. All the guys know you and Russ Wheaton are a couple. The other guys won't bother you."

I didn't know if I should be relieved or frightened. It was something of a relief to know I wasn't going to be mauled by Heather's male friends. But what did she mean when she said that Russ and I were a couple? I began to ask, but at that moment, loud voices – loud male voices – rose up from the kitchen and became louder when the sliding door into the pool area opened. Three tall, well-built guys each wearing nothing but baggy shorts and flip-flops bustled through the door.

"Hey, babe!" the tallest – a dark-haired guy well-tanned and in prime shape – called out.

"Hey, Reggie," Heather called back. The other guys hung back a little, but spent significant moments mentally undressing Melissa, Rachel... and me!

Reggie's gaze turned to me. He grinned. "So you're Amanda," he said appreciatively.

"Yeah!" I managed to squeak out.

"Hey, Russ did okay for himself, huh, guys?"

The other two guys nodded in approval with grunts of approval.

"This is Gus and CJ," Reggie introduced his friends, without bothering to say which was which.

I nodded, wishing I could find a deep hole to jump into. Neither Gus nor CJ looked me in the eye. Both were too busy looking at my breasts.



"So what's it like having a cunt?" one of them asked rudely. I later learned he was CJ, one of the team's running backs. He was a decent-looking guy, but known for being on the crude side. Of course, I already knew that when the girls later confirmed it.

"Lay off, guys," Heather came to my rescue, walking over to take Reggie's arm. "You all know the rules. Amanda's just one of the girls. No questions about her past."

The boys all looked disappointed. I suppose if I had been in their shoes, I would have wanted to know the answer to that question, too. No red-blooded American male wanted to be without his penis – me included. I still hadn't gotten used to the idea that I was no longer the proud owner of one.

For a moment, there was an uncomfortable silence. Talking about sex – my sex in particular – was obviously what they wanted to do. Finally, Reggie broke the silence. "So, are we going swimming or what?"

Gus and CJ brightened considerably, both cheering loudly and running into the pool, creating a splash all the way back to where we were sitting. I must have been quite a sight, squealing with the other girls as we pushed back to avoid the spray.

Reggie walked over to Heather, gently pulling on her arm. "Come on, doll. Let's go swimming!"

Squealing and laughing, she called out, "No, you big jerk! I don't want to get my hair wet."

Her protests were weak, and she resisted only enough to be playfully reluctant as Reggie dragged her to the pool. He picked her up, spun around three times and threw her into the pool. "Bastard!" she laughed.

Then Gus and CJ climbed out of the pool and made their way toward Melissa and Rachel. I had already jumped to my feet, not knowing what I was going to do if they came after me. In the moment that it became apparent I was not their target, I was both relieved and somehow disappointed. It was as if I had been rejected. Melissa and Rachel experience a fate similar to Heather's, being thrown screaming and laughing into the pool. I seriously contemplated heading for the house before they all noticed I wasn't wet yet.

No such luck.

All three boys turned to me at once, wicked grins on their faces. "Wait, no..." I protested. Suddenly, I felt very weak and helpless. No one had thrown me into the pool since my dad did it to me when I was ten.

"Consider this your initiation to girlhood," Reggie chuckled.

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